

18 THE **JAMES BOYS**

WEEKLY.

Containing Stories of Adventure.

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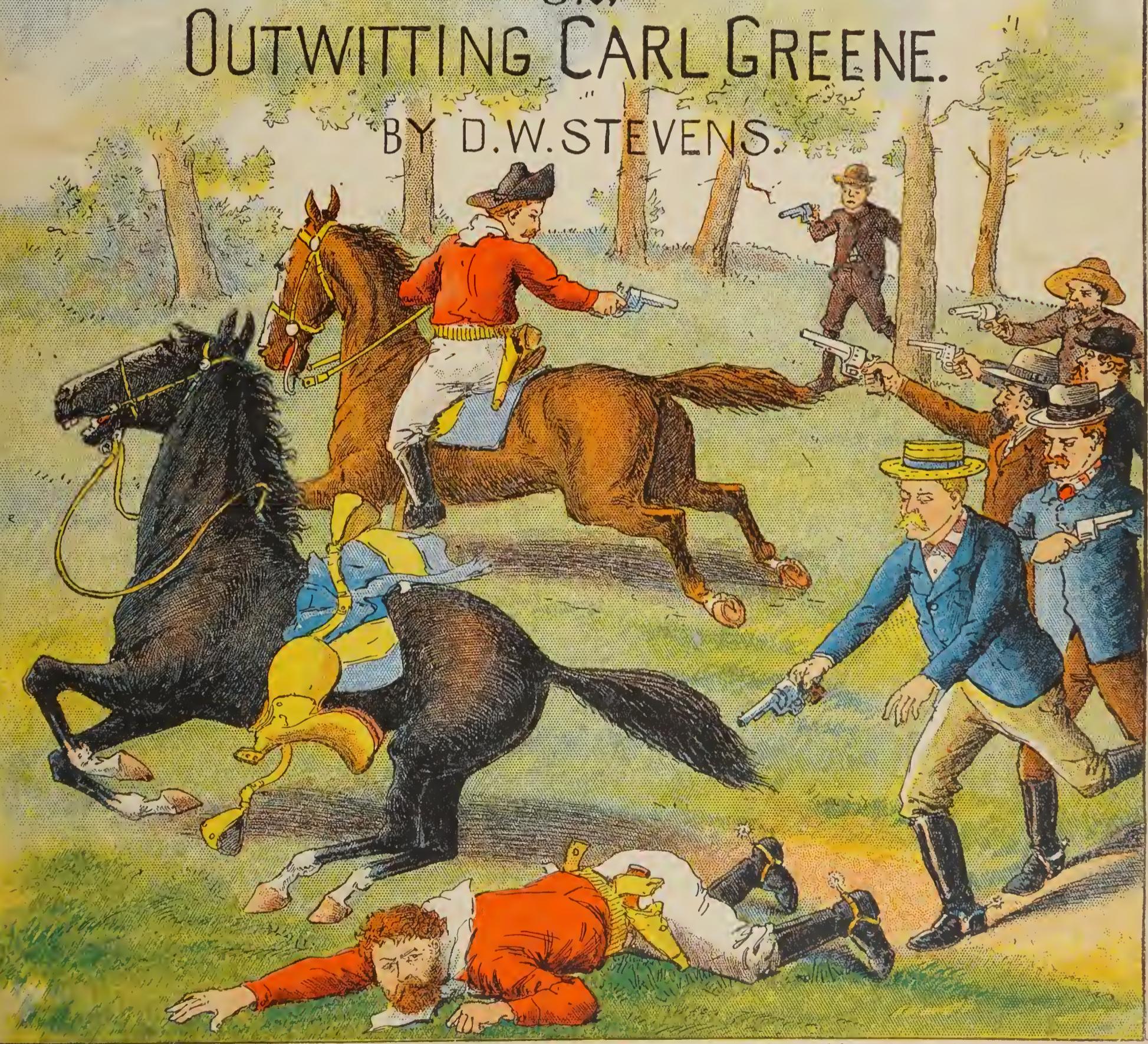
Price 5 Cents.

THE JAMES BOYS' HUT;

OR,

OUTWITTING CARL GREENE.

BY D.W. STEVENS.



Jesse sprang at the saddle. The girth snapped. Half a dozen shots blazed as the girth snapped. Siroc made a desperate leap to one side and Jesse James was thrown down. Carl Greene hurled himself on Jesse. The others went for Jim Cummins.

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CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT ON THE ST. FRANCOIS.

St. Francois County is one of the wildest, most broken and picturesque counties in the State of Missouri.

During the war of the Rebellion it was made the theater of the wildest adventures and most terrible death struggles and trying scenes.

St. Francois County is to-day almost an unexplored wilderness, at least in some parts of it. There are deep forests in the county which the foot of man has never trod, there are wonderful caverns which no man save the great Missouri outlaws ever entered; there are gorges, bluffs and breaks and glens where a man may conceal himself a lifetime from all the world.

These haunts were the hiding-places for the famous James Boys when close pursued, and also the abode of the desperate outlaw and friend of the James Boys, known all over the world as Samuel Hilderbrand. While the James Boys loved plunder, Hilderbrand loved blood.

He was wholly unlike the other bandits, as we shall see in the progress of our story.

Several years ago, at the close of a delightful day in June, a man riding a coal-black horse, whose rich blood seemed to shine forth through his glossy skin, was going at a slow canter down a long slope, over which the road ran.

There was something striking and peculiar about this horseman. He was a handsome young fellow, with close trimmed, dark-brown hair covering his face. He was dressed in black clothes of finest broadcloth, and his feet were encased in high top riding boots, which came almost to his knees. On his head jauntily set a broad-brimmed hat, giving to him the air of a dashing cavalier. His face was not an unpleasant one, but there was an uneasy, anxious look about him, as he glanced at the forests on either side of the road.

"The sun is low in the sky," the strange equestrian remarked, glancing to the west. "Very well, Siroc, we will not be too early."

Suddenly Siroc sniffed the air uneasily and pricked up his ears. His action did not escape the notice of his rider, who involuntarily thrust his hand under his coat, and allowed it to rest on the butt of a pistol.

"Whoa, Siroc! Keep your eyes open. Hawks are around," said the horseman, as if his animal understood every word he said.

The quick ear of the horseman at this moment detected a faint sound in the bushes on his right.

Suddenly a young man came creeping slowly through the bushes, holding a long-barreled rifle in his hand.

"Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho! I've got yer now, ain't I?"

"I don't know; who are you?"

"I'm Billy Brown, a constable o' Flat Crick Township, d'ye hear, an' yer one o' ther James Boys. Git down off yer high hoss an' come right here ter me."

"Well, Billy, please be kind enough to lower that weapon, it makes me nervous. Just lower it, please, and allow me to come nearer."

Billy lowered the muzzle of his gun.

Then, as quick as a flash, the horseman threw himself from the saddle, alighting on the head and shoulders of Billy and hurling him to the ground, and, taking a stout cord from his pocket, he bound Billy hand and foot.

"Oh, help, help, help!" cried Billy.

Then Jesse James, for the mysterious horseman was none other, dragged him to the edge of a cliff, flinging him over it, and with a frightful shriek, he went down to an awful death.

Jesse ran back to the road and mounted his horse.

He rode down to the foot of a great hill and entered one of those rich valleys so common in the wild regions of the St. Francois County. After galloping three or four miles along a well beaten road, he came to one of the most elegant farm-houses in the country.

The sun had set and it was growing almost dark, when he rode up to the house. In fact, it was so dark that he could not see an object very far away.

Carelessly dismounting at the gate, he called to a negro boy who was standing near, and said:

"Jeff, can't you put my horse away?"

"Golly, Massa Jackson, am dat you?"

"Yes." Jesse took from his pocket a silver dollar which he gave the negro boy.

"Here, Jeff, is some silver; take him to the barn and feed him well; I know I can trust you."

"Bet yer kin, massa, ez long ez yer gin me them shiners."

Then Jesse went boldly to the house.

A large watch dog started up barking furiously for a few moments, but recognizing an old acquaintance in the new-comer, his angry barks gave place to whines of welcome.

"Carlo, be ashamed of yourself for barking at an old friend," said Jesse James.

Carlo seemed cowed and ashamed, and tucking his tail between his legs, went away.

Jesse rapped at the door.

A young lady came and opened it.

It was quite evident that she and Jesse James were no strangers to each other, although she addressed him by another name than his own.

"Mr. Jackson, good-evening," she said.

"Madaline, I have come."

"Yes, I am glad to see you. Walk in, Mr. Jackson."

"Are you alone?"

"Only the servants are about the house."

"I am glad."

"Why?"

"I want to talk with you, Madaline."

She smiled and led the way to an elegantly furnished parlor, such as sometimes may be found in south Missouri.

Here they sat down.

On a center table were several large lumps of silver ore.

"Where is your father, Madaline?" Jesse asked.

"I don't know."

"When did he leave home?"

"This morning."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Did he take his pick?" and Jesse fixed his eyes greedily on the large lumps of pure virgin ore.

"Yes."

"Then he went to his mine?"

"I suppose he did."

"Madaline, where is this silver mine?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No, Mr. Jackson. I have tried to find out, but I never can. He won't tell me."

"Did you ask him?"

"Yes."

"Has he trusted no one with the secret?"

"No. He disappears with his pick and the big white mule, and is gone a day or two, when he comes back with the mule laden with silver ore which he has evidently dug out of the ground somewhere, and then he ships it."

"Are you quite sure he intrusts no one with his secret?"

"I don't think that he does," she answered.

"And here is a world of wealth hidden away and only one man knows of its existence. Why don't you insist on his telling you?"

"I have."

"And won't he?"

"He refuses."

Jesse ground his teeth in rage and disappointment.

A neat, little, well-laid plot was about to be wholly frustrated. But Jesse was not wholly despondent. He determined to get at the old silver-digger's secret in some way, by fair means or foul.

"Madaline, won't you learn where it is in some way? Can't you manage to worm the secret out of him?"

"I don't know."

"Will you try?"

"I will do my best."

"I hope you will succeed."

"For your sake, I hope so, too, Mr. Jackson; but supper is ready. Come to the dining-room, you must be hungry."

"I want to get away before your father comes," Jesse said. "If he should find me here he would not like it. Mr. McIlvane has not much love for me, although I am his prospective son-in-law. He has always seemed to mistrust me since the day I tried to trail him to his secret mine."

"You are right, Mr. Jackson. father does not like you, and he has forbidden you to come here!"

"I know it. Nevertheless, so long as his pretty daughter don't object, I shall not let the distaste of parents worry me."

While they sat at the sumptuously furnished table, partaking

of the feast she had spread before him, two faces peeped into the window at them. Jesse James did not see them.

A smile flitted over the faces of the men as they saw Jesse playing the part of lover in order to gain the old silver-digger's secret. They tarried but a moment and then stole away from the window. After they had gone out of ear-shot from the house, one of them said:

"Frank, that brother of yours is a good one!"

"You bet he is, Jim."

"There he is, making love to that girl, when he has a wife and children."

"Jesse is up to all such tricks. But he is only making love to old McIlvane's daughter for a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"To get at the old man's secret."

The two men had been quietly stealing along the orchard fence as they talked, and now were out of danger of being heard. They leaped the fence and went across the lane to where their horses stood tied to trees.

These two persons were Frank James, a brother of Jesse James, and Jim Cummins, one of the most trusted of all the James Boys' band.

"Jim, let's wait until Jesse comes."

"Does he know we are in the neighborhood?"

"Yes."

"Well, I expect it would be better to wait."

In the meanwhile the artful Jesse James was doing all in his power to wholly win the affections of the foolish Madaline, that he might make of her an unsuspecting ally to rob her father.

He was so absorbed in his task in hand that he did not notice how time was flying, until he heard loud voices outside. Most of the speakers were negroes, but he recognized among them the voice of Mr. McIlvane himself.

"Bring him in; I don't think he is quite dead yet," Jesse heard Mr. McIlvane say.

"Whar'd ye find him, massa?" one of the negroes asked.

"At the foot of the bluff. Some one flung him over. Try to bring him around to consciousness, if for no other purpose than to learn who his murderer is," said Mr. McIlvane.

Jesse James started up from the table with an angry exclamation, and laid his hand on his revolver.

"Papa has come, Mr. Jackson," said Madaline. "Go out this way at the back door. Papa must not see you. For my sake go!"

He rose hurriedly, and as she had requested, slipped out at the rear door.

He had not been gone two minutes when four negroes entered, carrying the insensible and dying Billy into the house,

"Why didn't the fall kill the fool?" he hissed. "Had it been any other man it would have done so, but this wretch seems to hold a charmed life."

Jesse went to the barn, found Siroc, and, throwing the saddle on his back, put the bit in his mouth and mounted.

"Now let them follow me who will, and catch me who can," he declared when he had mounted his horse.

As he was speeding along the road he came upon two dark objects which loomed up at the roadside.

Those objects were dim and indistinct at first, so as to cause Jesse James a little uneasiness, and make him rather shy of approaching too close.

He drew back his horse, and the faint click of his pistol was heard.

"Jesse," a voice said.

"Frank!"

"It is I."

Jesse laughed and galloped forward.

"Is that Jim Cummins with you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What are you doing out here?"

"We are waiting for you, Jesse."

"Well, boys, were you following me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Without answering Jesse's question, Frank asked another.

"Did you gain the information you wanted?"

"No."

"And you still don't know where the silver mine is?"

"No."

"Well, Jesse."

"What?"

"I believe I do."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"I don't mean to say that we actually know where the hidden mine is, but that unless I am very much mistaken we have a clew."

"Have you?"

"I believe we have."

"Where?"

"On the St. Francois."

"What is it?"

"We have heard that there is a mysterious man wandering about in that region, and that he is the one who holds the key to the secret."

"Let us find him."

"That is just exactly what we proposed to do."

They lost no time in wheeling their horses about and starting as fast as they could down the road.

St. Francois County has but little level land in it, and the James Boys had not ridden far before they were compelled to draw rein, for the ground had become so uneven that they could not ride at a gallop.

Suddenly Frank, who was riding before, said:

"We'll have to go careful here, boys."

"Were you ever here before, Frank?" Jesse asked.

"No. Were you?"

"Not exactly in this locality."

"Can you see your hand before you?"

"Yes, I can see a short distance. But we will have to go in single file, for I tell you it is too rough for us to travel three abreast."

"I believe you."

"Follow me, Jesse."

"All right."

"And I will bring up the rear," said Jim Cummins.

The three had not gone many rods before the descent became so steep as to be really dangerous.

"Halt!" said Frank.

Then the three men drew rein.

Jesse James at last said:

"Whist!"

"What do you hear?"

"Some one is coming up the slope."

"Yes, I hear a horseman," put in Jim.

"And I hear the roaring of the St. Francois," added Frank.

The tramp of horses' feet and the crashing of stones could be distinctly heard. The iron shod hoofs started the loose stones, and they rolled down the steep hill and plunged into the water. The labored breathing and scrambling of the horse coming up the slope told how difficult it was to climb.

Jesse James held a trusty revolver in his right hand, and Siroc's rein in his left.

"Frank, let me get before," he said in a whisper.

"Jesse, do be careful," cautioned Frank, "for just go five paces forward and you will tumble down into the river."

"I know it."

"The fall is a long one."

"Yes, and it is doubtful if one could get out of that water were he to plunge into it."

"You are correct there."

"I don't care to get into it, and give it a trial," Jim Cummins said.

"Whist!" said Jesse, in a low, faint whisper.

They had all along been talking in whispers.

At this moment they heard the voice of some one saying from below:

"What sort of a plaguey place is this I am in?"

At sound of the voice Jesse James started like a greyhound that has suddenly scented a deer.

That voice was familiar on his ear, in fact, too familiar.

"Frank!" he whispered.

"Do you know him, Jess—do you recognize him?"

"Leave him to me."

"Will you kill him?"

"Get back out of sight," was all the answer he deigned to make. Frank made no return.

The strictest discipline was exacted by the James Boys. Jesse James, the great fountain head of the organization on extraordinary occasions like the present, exercised almost regal powers.

When he spoke his voice was low but firm, and his followers obeyed him as implicitly as if he had been a crowned head, and they his subjects.

The man who was climbing the steep hill was unaware of their presence. He was giving all his time and attention to the perilous ascent.

Though the animal was rough-shod, its feet frequently slipped, and at times it could scarce maintain its footing.

"Get up—get up!" said the advancing horseman, little dreaming that a foe was at the top, awaiting him with a cocked pistol.

Suddenly the horseman gained the top of the steep hill.

Just as he did so a voice cried:

"Halt!"

"Whoa!"

"You are my prisoner."

"Never!"

Crack!

Crack!

Two blinding flashes, two stunning reports, then all was darkness.

But all was not silence. To the two bandits waiting in the bushes it seemed as if a score of fiends were battling. There were cries, angry curses, neighing and snorting of horses, clattering of hoofs, as maddened animals reared and plunged, and at last there were two falls and two terrible splashes. All was darkness.

CHAPTER II.

THE LONE HUNTER.

"Jesse, Jesse," called Frank.

There was no answer.

"Jim!"

"Has he gone over, Frank?"

"Both have gone over."

Frank James in his anxiety started his horse forward, but Jim Cummins seized the rein.

"Stop!" Jim said.

"Why?"

"Because if you don't you will be dashed to death down there."

"What are we to do?"

"Dismount and light torches."

"But Jesse is in the water."

"Hold my horse."

Jim Cummins was certainly the good angel of the James Boys. He was ready in every emergency to act for them, when a cool head and steady arm was all that could save them. They were never in a close place that Jim Cummins did not come to their rescue, and help them out of their trouble.

Slipping from his saddle in a marvellously short time he had gathered up a bunch of dry pine sticks and set them blazing.

A great red flame of light shone forth showing the sloping hill to the very water's edge. The dark rolling stream was just below them, and into this Jesse James and the unknown antagonist had plunged.

"Do you see him, Jim?"

"No."

"He has gone under."

Jim went down the slope a short distance, holding on to some bushes to keep from falling, and cried:

"No."

"Is he there?"

"Yes. Jesse!"

"I am alive yet," answered a voice from the water.

"Jesse is alive, he is alive!" cried Jim Cummins.

"Hurray!" shouted Frank.

"This way, Jesse; guide Siroc a little further up the river," said Jim Cummins, clambering down the steep embankment, and holding aloft a pine torch which shone out over the water.

The head of Jesse James and his noble steed could both be seen above the dark, turbid waters as they struggled nobly through the surging flood. Jesse caught hold of Siroc's mane, and, slipping from the saddle into the water, aided the noble animal to swim up the swift current.

"A little further up and the bank will be sloping enough for you to get out, Jesse."

"All right; I am coming."

He guided his horse up the stream.

Jim Cummins ran along the first bank close to the water's edge and called to Jesse again and again, to encourage him.

"Here you are!" he said at last.

"I see the place, Jim."

"Head for it with all your might."

"Aye, aye!"

Horse and rider swam with all their strength for the embankment, and Jim at last cried:

"Now you can make it."

"Yes."

"All right."

"I am all right," said Jesse.

"There you are."

Siroc suddenly threw out his fore-feet and placing them on the top of the bank gained a foothold, and leaped upon dry land.

Both Jesse and his horse were dripping with water.

"Jesse, whom did you grapple with?" asked Jim Cummins.

"Carl Greene."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Oh, I know it."

"Where is he?"
 "I don't know."
 "Did you kill him?"
 "I aimed to, but I doubt it."
 Frank now appeared on the crest of the hill and called:
 "Jesse, are you all right?"

"Yes."
 "Who was it?"
 "Carl Greene."
 "Where is he?"
 "At the bottom of the river, I hope."

"Did you see him go under?"
 "No. We both fell together, and the result is we were separated by the fall. Naturally both of us were stunned, and whether he was drowned or not I cannot say. It was too dark to see anything."

Jim Cummins shook his head ruefully and answered:

"Jesse, I'll bet my head for a football that he was not hurt at all. You will find him alive and well."

"I expect so."

Jesse James was soaking wet, and the water ran in small rivulets from his clothes. He shivered with cold and his teeth chattered:

"We must get out of here, Jim."

"Yes, but you had better wring your clothes first and get the water out of them."

"I'll do that."

Jesse removed his garments one at a time, and wrung the water from them.

In a few moments he was ready to make the effort to ascend. Then Jim Cummins, with a freshly lighted pine knot, guided him to the road which led to the top of the hill.

When they reached the top they made a short pause to recover their breath, and Jesse said:

"Jim, I don't believe that one man in a thousand could make that fall and not be killed."

Jim thought so, too, and Frank James coming up at that moment declared it impossible for a man and horse to fall down that steep descent without actually killing both.

"Yet I doubt if it killed Carl Greene," said Jesse.

"Why, how could it help killing him?"

"Carl is very hard to kill."

"Yes, but no man could take that plunge and live."

"I did, Frank, and I am alive yet," said Jesse, with a smile.

"Yes, but Jesse, you know you hold a charmed life. You have gone where no man ever went and lived or any other man can ever go."

"Oh, pshaw, Frank, any other person might do exactly what I have done."

"Well, I don't believe it."

"I do, and I'll tell you what is more; I'll wager anything that Carl Greene is still alive."

"Come, let us go."

They carefully led their horses along the narrow path, for the way was so dangerous that they dared not mount.

Jesse went before. In a few moments the gentle wind, which came sighing through the trees, had dried the clothes of the outlaw chief.

Siroc seemed none the worse for his fall and ducking in the water.

After traveling about three miles they came to lower and leveler ground. Jesse thought they might now mount their horses again, and consequently the three men vaulted in their saddles.

They were riding leisurely along the road when suddenly Jesse said:

"Stop, boys. Don't you see that?"

"What?"

"Look straight ahead."

The three men did so and espied what at first seemed to be a star in the woods.

"Can you make it out?"

"A camp-fire," Frank answered.

"A torch," suggested Jim Cummins.

"No, a camp," Jesse James asserted.

"That is so; it don't move."

"No."

They waited a moment sitting silently on their horses, watching the mysterious camp-fire in the distance.

At last Jesse James said:

"Boys, I am going to see what it is."

"Jesse," said Frank, "maybe it is Carl Greene."

"No, it is not. You said Carl was dead."

"And you said he wasn't."

"I know he is not dead and I know that is not him, but I am going to see who it is."

He dismounted and handed the rein to Jim, and said:

"Hold him until I come back."

"You may need us, Jesse."

"No, I think not. If I should need you I will come back after you."

Then Jesse crept away into the great dark forest, keeping carefully concealed behind trees and bushes, and watching the fire-light as he gradually approached nearer and nearer to it. As he crept closer and closer to the strange camp, the bandit king strained his eyes to get a glimpse of the person who was at it.

At last he saw a tall figure moving about the light.

"Perhaps it is some wandering band of Indians," he thought.

Then he remembered that the Indians seldom visited that part of Missouri. He went carefully forward from tree to tree, until he was within two hundred paces of the camp-fire, and then, holding a revolver in his right hand, he crouched down at the root of a tree, to watch, wait and listen.

The man was evidently a restless fellow.

He got up several times and walked about the camp-fire. Then he would sit down again and yawn.

Jesse James crept cautiously forward until he was near enough to have a good view of the man.

He was a tall, powerful fellow, with long, sandy beard and hair. In his hand he carried a rifle, and about his waist he wore a belt in which were thrust two or three ugly-looking revolvers. Jesse was now sorely puzzled to understand the fellow. Who could he be?

He made a complete circuit, taking in the situation from every side, and satisfied himself that there was but one man in the camp. He then made his way to his friends.

A low whistle announced his approach.

"Well, Jesse, what did you see?" Jim Cummins asked.

"A man."

"Only one?"

"That was all."

"What is he doing?"

"He is in camp, and seems to be hiding, if I am a judge of a man's motions."

"Did you discover whether he was armed or not?"

"Yes."

"Is he?"

"He is. He has a long, ugly-looking rifle and two or three vicious-looking revolvers."

"Jesse, I'll bet it is he," said Jim Cummins.

"The man who knows the secret of the silver mine?"

"Yes."

"Well, how are we to get it?"

"First, let us get him."

"That's easier said than done."

"Perhaps; but we will see."

Then they sat down for a few moments to rest and think. Jesse's face wore a perplexed look.

"Boys," he at last said, "I believe I can take him."

"How?"

"Asleep."

"Well, you know the old adage, Jesse, 'catch a weasel asleep.'"

"I am going to try it. I wonder what time it is?"

"I'll see," Jim answered. He drew an elegant gold watch from his vest pocket, and holding it under his coat, struck a match, which he held in such a way that not a ray of light could escape.

"It is past two," he said.

"Then it is time that gent should get to bed, if he is going to get any sleep to-night," said Jesse.

"Yes."

"Let us get closer to his camp."

Jesse began crawling forward. The others followed.

Nearer and nearer they crept.

At last they were near enough to see the tall form stretched out before the fire, his feet toward it.

Jesse now held up his hand for his followers to stop. He would go forward himself.

They were so close to the sleeper that they dared not speak and scarce dared breathe.

The camp fire burned dimly and threw out a faint, ghost-like light.

Jesse crept on, and on, nearer and nearer, until he was almost at the tall man.

The rifle was under his head and his hands were each on a revolver.

Jesse rose and crouched like a panther about to spring.

The sleeping man heard him not. Long days and nights of exertion and anxiety had exhausted his iron frame, and now despite his danger, his slumber was profound.

Jesse James made one tremendous leap. He sprang upon the sleeper, and, seizing each wrist, held them like a vice.

"Here, here, let me up!" cried the suddenly awakened hunter.

"Keep still!"

"I won't."

"You must—you shall!"

"Let me go, I say, lem me go or I'll kill ye."

"No, you won't!"

"Oh, let me go!"

There was a desperate struggle and the suddenly awakened man fought with maddened desperation. Jesse James found that he had attacked a giant in strength, and it required all his exertion to keep the fellow from throwing him on his back and drawing his revolver.

Jesse James could easily have shot the man while he slept, but it was not a part of his plan to do so. He had a special object in making him a captive.

"Jim, Frank," Jesse called.

"We are here."

"Help."

They did not come a moment too soon.

In ten minutes longer the probabilities are that Jesse James would have been overpowered and killed. But they finally overcame the stranger and made him a prisoner.

"Well, ye've done it," he said in a voice that more resembled subdued thunder than anything else to which it can be compared. "Well, have it over with at once. Hang me if ye will. I've killed many o' you un's and I'm glad of it."

"We don't intend to kill you," said Jesse.

"Now, what's the use o' lyin' about it? Ye do intend to kill me and ye know it."

"We want to ask you some questions."

"Ask 'em. I've got no secrets now. When ye got me you got all my secrets."

"Not at all."

"Yes, the last one."

"We want to ask if you know Firman McIlvane?"

"Firman McIlvane," cried the prisoner, grinding his teeth in rage, "of course I know him. He killed my brother. He headed the mob that hung Frank Hilderbrand. Oh, if you will let me go long enough to kill him, I will die easy. I must kill him, yes, I must kill him before I die!"

Jesse James opened his eyes wide with astonishment. It was quite evident that they had made a very grave mistake. Then he asked:

"Don't you know that McIlvane has discovered a rich treasure—a silver mine?"

"Has he?"

"Yes."

"Well, may he die in a sink hole, where he threw my poor brother!"

"Come, come," said Jesse James in a despairing voice, "don't you know anything of the mine?"

"No."

"What is your name?"

"Sam Hilderbrand."

Jesse James started back and gave vent to a prolonged whistle. He and Frank and Jim exchanged glances, and then all three burst into a laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded Sam Hilderbrand.

"You are safe, sir; you can have your liberty."

In a moment Sam Hilderbrand was released from captivity and given his gun and revolvers.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Jesse James."

"What, not Jesse James, the famous bandit king, of whom I have heard so much?"

"I am the original and only Jesse James, and, like yourself, Sam Hilderbrand, an outlaw."

"Shake!"

These two bandit princes shook hands, and from this time on were the very best of friends.

"You are welcome to my home, which is the woods. Sit down, boys."

Hilderbrand threw on two or three more sticks of wood and sat on a chunk before the cheerful blaze.

"Come, boys, make yourselves at home. The old green wood is my house. It is large and you are welcome to it. It has been my home for many years. In fact, I have not known any other since the war."

"I suppose not."

"You served in the war?"

"Yes."

"Under Quantrell?"

"Yes."

"He operated on the prairie. He was the cavalier on horseback, but my service was that of an independent brigand on foot. Jeff Thompson commissioned me major."

"Then you are Major Hilderbrand?"

"No," he sadly answered. "I once thought I was, but I was not able to read my own commission. Besides, Jeff Thompson had no authority to grant it."

"I suppose not."

"I don't believe that he knew any better at the time. I did raise a company of men. It was only a small company, though. I never had over twenty-five or thirty men at the most, but we did some ugly work. I didn't want to be in the war, and least of all did I want to be an outlaw, but they drove me to it. My brother was hung by a vigilance committee, headed by Firman McIlvane, my house was burned, and my wife and children ill-treated and driven from home. Like Logan, the Mingoe chief, I swore to be avenged."

"And you had your vengeance?"

"I have in part. After they hung my brother Frank I took my family and went to live at Flatwood. Firman McIlvane found where I was, and sent eighty Federal soldiers to drive me out and hang me."

"Did they succeed in capturing you?"

"Well, I'll tell you all about that. I had been hauling wood. As soon as I unloaded my wagon I stepped into the house, and the first thing I knew there came eighty soldiers at a gallop and began to surround my house. I grabbed my gun and ran, leaping a picket fence which their horses could not jump. They fired at me, and I shot one man from the saddle.

"A bullet broke a bone in my leg, and I held on to the bushes to keep from falling and not let them know I was wounded, for by this time I was in the dense thicket. I got to a gully full of leaves and crawled in among the leaves, and in a short time I was completely covered. They actually jumped their horses over me.

"As I lay there in the gully I made war against the United States and all the people thereof, and I have kept my vow. My faithful rifle, 'Old Killdevil'—and here Sam Hilderbrand stopped to pat his famous gun affectionately—"has been my only companion. She alone knows my secrets, and has always been my best friend. The soldiers burnt my house and all that was in it.

"My poor wife and helpless little ones were driven from home—in fact, they had no home. From that day to this I have made war on the people who wronged me. With me the war has never ceased to this day. Although it is now many, many years since it began, there is no sign of it abating. Do you see those notches?" he asked, pointing to the stock of his gun covered with notches.

"Yes," Jesse answered.

"Every notch represents a man I have shot at some time."

Jesse James, brigand and bandit king as he was, shuddered. He could not help doing so when he contemplated such a fearful record.

"Now if you say so we will form an alliance," the lone hunter of men suggested.

"I am willing."

"It is done. Let us sleep," said Hilderbrand.

Jim and Frank brought up the horses. One remained awake on guard and the others were soon asleep.

CHAPTER III.

CARL GREENE AND HILDERBRAND.

Two or three weeks passed without any event worth mentioning. The James Boys went with Sam Hilderbrand to his cave, which was in one of the most secluded parts of the wood.

"No one save myself has ever entered here," said the tall outlaw. "I don't like to trust people with my secrets."

"You are right."

"But if we are to be partners in business, we must share each other's secrets and confidence."

"Have you never had a companion?" Jesse James asked.

"Yes, several. Tom Hailey was my most faithful companion. He was known as Outlaw Tom, but he was killed."

"How long since?"

"Two years ago."

Jesse James discovered that the bandit did not care to dwell on the event, so he decided to ask him no more about it. Sam Hilderbrand was silent for several minutes, and then said:

"I suppose you would like to hear the story of how poor Tom came to be rubbed out. Well, I know you would like it, though you won't say so. So I will tell it," and Hilderbrand began:

"Tom and I had four other companions, but two of them were caught and sent to the penitentiary. Then we went to the house of one Coots. He betrayed us and tried to take us in, and had an armed posse at hand for that purpose, but I shot Coots and three or four others and made for the woods. But they killed two o' our boys. Tom and I were all that got away."

"Then for a long time Tom and I were alone. He went out one day. I didn't want him to go, because I had seen detectives laying around, watching a chance to get us, but Tom would go. He had not been gone long when I heard firing down toward Eagle

THE JAMES BOYS' HUT.

Lake, and I grabbed my gun and ran down in that direction. By and by I came up to the edge of the lake, and I saw the water bubbling up at the spot where Tom had gone down, and I saw two men standing looking at the spot, holding guns in their hands. They had killed him, I knew, and I just up and shot them both and tumbled them in before they had time to run away. I thus avenged poor Tom."

Then Sam Hilderbrand was silent.

That day Hilderbrand went out to reconnoiter, leaving the James Boys alone in the cavern.

"What do you think of this hiding-place, Jesse?" Jim Cummins asked, when they were alone.

"I don't know, Jim, that I ever saw a more convenient one," Jesse answered.

Then Jim Cummins proposed that they look about the cavern some. Jesse James agreed to the proposition, and the three James Boys proceeded to investigate the cavern.

It was a vast grotto.

It extended for two or three miles into the bowels of the earth, and was large enough to have sheltered a whole army of cavalry.

"This is an excellent place for our horses," Frank James remarked.

"Do you suppose that Carl Greene will ever find us in here?" Jim Cummins asked.

"No," Jesse answered.

"Did you closely observe the entrance?"

"Yes."

"Would it be difficult to discover?"

"It would almost be impossible. He has done all that nature had not already done to conceal it."

"How?"

"He has painted a canvas screen so as to cover the entrance. The screen looks so exactly like a stone that one would hardly believe it anything else even if they had examined it."

"And did you observe all that?"

"Yes."

"I did not. I was too tired."

They found a vast underground river flowing through the cavern. They tried to sound its depths, but were unable to find any bottom.

"This is remarkable," Frank James declared.

"I believe the river would float a boat."

"It would."

"But let us go back and wait for the return of Hilderbrand," said Jesse James.

When all had reached the front apartment, they threw themselves on the dressed skins which had been prepared for beds, and began to speculate on the future.

"How is all this going to end?" Jim Cummins asked. "I don't like this county half as much as Clay County."

"Nor I," put in Frank.

"Well, Jesse, how long do you intend to stay here?"

"That depends on how long it will take to find old Firman McIlvane's silver mine."

"How did you learn of the silver mine, Jesse?"

"I read of it in the St. Louis Republic."

"How did that paper get hold of it?"

"How does it get all the news?" Jesse answered. "I don't know how it got it, but when I read it in the columns of that journal I knew it was true, and I resolved to come to this county and by some hook or crook to find it. I came, bringing you two with me. If we have to stay a whole year and can find the silver mine, we will be more than repaid for our trouble."

"But if we spend the whole year and get nothing for it, that is, don't find the mine, will it pay us?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"We will stay another year."

Jim Cummins made no answer to this. He knew how headstrong and determined Jesse James was, and knew full well that it was not worth while to argue with him.

But for the present it will be better for the correct understanding of our story to leave the James Boys in the cavern and follow the fortunes of Hilderbrand.

Sam Hilderbrand never emerged from his cave that he did not do so with as much caution as if he knew that a foe was standing without ready to shoot him down.

This had long been a habit of the outlaw. He had long been a hunted man.

Before he emerged from his cavern he always took a good, long look from a small orifice in the canvas covering at the mouth. Then he partially opened the canvas door and gazed out at the scene before him. When he found nothing to alarm him, the long muzzle of his rifle next appeared.

Sam Hilderbrand soon after followed.

The trees and brushwood grew thick about the mouth of the

cavern. Into these he plunged. He was as much at home in the woods and brush as was a fish in the water.

The object of Sam's present reconnoissance was to see if there were any detectives or officers in the neighborhood.

In the body of an old hollow tree he found a disguise, which he donned, and then started through the woods.

He had not gone far before he saw a man walking through the woods. He wore a straw hat and was in his shirt sleeves. He carried a gun on his shoulder, and Hilderbrand soon discovered that he was no more dangerous than a hunter after small game.

"I believe it's Joe Padget, but he won't know me," Hilderbrand thought. "Anyhow, I am going to call him and see what he knows."

He went down across a ravine so as to meet the hunter. By this movement he came face to face with him.

"Howdy do, stranger?" he said.

"How are ye?" growled Padget.

"Huntin'?"

"Yes, and so are you, it seems."

"I am."

"Have any luck?"

"No."

"Guess you are after big game?"

"Yes, I am. I want a deer, but I ain't able to find one."

At this moment Padget said:

"Hello, who be that a-coming?"

"Where?"

"Over the hill."

Hilderbrand had his rifle in his hand, and his thumb was on the hammer as if to pull it back at a moment.

He now saw a horseman coming riding slowly over the hill toward them.

"Do you know him?" he asked Padget.

"Don't believe I do."

"Have you ever seen him before?"

"Don't think I ever did."

The horseman was a middle-aged man wearing light, sandy hair and beard. He was rather genteelly dressed for this part of the country, where a well-dressed man was an oddity.

"He is coming directly this way, as I live."

"Yes, that is just what he is doing."

In a few moments the stranger came up to where the two men sat, Hilderbrand with his rifle convenient so as to shoot him down should he prove to be an officer.

"Good-day, gents," he said, quite politely.

It was quite apparent that he was a stranger to this part of the country. His speech as well as his manner indicated it.

"How are you?" growled Hilderbrand.

"Do you gentlemen live near?"

"I do," Padget answered.

"And you?" nodding to Hilderbrand.

"I don't live close."

The man on the horse had been watching him closely.

He said to himself:

"It's Jesse James in disguise; I'll bet anything that it is Jesse James in disguise."

Hilderbrand a short time after rose and said:

"I must go."

"Oh, don't be in a hurry," the horseman said.

The stranger on horseback seemed to have a fund of information to impart. He talked about anything and almost everything. His tongue was running all the time, but at the time he was telling all the neighborhood news he was putting some of the shrewdest questions to his patient listeners.

He was all unconscious to them, studying them and sounding them on every question.

This horseman was none other than Carl Greene, the famous detective with whom Jesse James had grappled and fallen over the bluff into the river.

He was puzzled about Sam Hilderbrand. He was about the same size as Jesse James. In truth Hilderbrand was slightly larger than the bandit king. But the difference was so very slight that one would hardly notice it at first sight.

The disguise which the outlaw Hilderbrand wore was such a one as Jesse James had never been seen to wear, but then Carl knew that Jesse was fruitful in resources.

What mostly puzzled Carl Greene was that the man whom he took to be Jesse James was dismounted, while Jesse was hardly ever, in fact, never known to be far from Siroc.

"Well, it is one of Jesse James' dodges," he finally concluded.

Then he left the two men and started away in the wood.

Sam Hilderbrand gazed at him with eyes that were flashing fire.

"If he attempts to trail me, it'll be the last trail he'll ever follow," he said.

Then Sam struck the barrel of his gun a savage blow and whispered:

"Old Killdevil, we may have something to do."

Hilderbrand was going cautiously through the woods, when he suddenly discovered a man walking toward him.

Not an hour had elapsed since he had seen the horseman at the fallen tree where he had been talking with Padget, and this man, who was on foot, could, of course, not have anything to do with him. The stranger came toward him, and with a smile said:

"Howdy?"

He was an old man, with face covered with short, white beard. His hair was almost white.

"Who are you?" demanded Hilderbrand.

"I'm ole Uncle Tommy Allen."

"Where are you going?"

"To see my darter, Sally Morris, down on Owl Creek."

"Well, Uncle Tommy, you may go on."

"Stop a bit. Now set down and let us talk some."

Hilderbrand gave him a suspicious look.

"Well, what have you got to say?" he asked.

"Dun believe yer like me."

"Well, old feller, I don't know that I do."

"Ain't yer skeered to travel these ere woods alone?"

"No."

"Yer should be."

"Why?"

"Bekase they do say as how the James Boys, they be in St. Francois County now."

"Well, what if they are?"

"Ain't you skeered o' 'em?"

"No; are you?"

"Yes."

"Then you had better go home."

"Look ye hyer, stranger, yer a big man—yer a young man, and I am a old man: now wot I want ter say ter ye is jist this—"

"I don't care to bother with you."

"But yer got a gun an' I ain't got nuthin'."

"Yes, and if you don't go away an' leave me alone almost blame quick I'll shoot you dead."

"Say, won't ye guard me home?"

"No."

"Come, I'm a pore old man."

At this moment Hilderbrand cocked his rifle to frighten the old man, when before he could possibly raise it to his face, that feeble old fellow had in a most remarkable manner, and with a swiftness that was purely wonderful, whipped out a revolver, and, leveling it at his head, cried:

"Surrender! Drop that gun, or you are a dead man!"

He had the drop on Sam Hilderbrand, and with chattering teeth the outlaw asked:

"Who are you?"

"Carl Greene. Jesse James, you know me well, and know that I am not to be trifled with. Surrender or die!"

CHAPTER IV.

JESSE AND MADALINE.

Although Sam Hilderbrand saw at once that Carl Greene had mistaken him for Jesse James, the discovery made it none the less dangerous to him. He determined not to be arrested as Jesse James or anybody else.

For an instant he was undecided what to do. Though he had never met Carl Greene before, the fame of this wonderful detective had reached the remote haunts of the St. Francois which he inhabited, and he fully realized how dangerous it was to fall into his clutches.

"Come, come, Jesse James," said Carl Greene sternly; "you are a man of sense, and you know enough of me to know that I am one who is not to be trifled with. Surrender! Make a single move to use that gun, and as sure as you stand there I will drop you dead."

"I ain't Jesse James," growled Hilderbrand.

"Oh, come, that won't do, Jesse. True, your disguise is a remarkable one, but I appreciate your talents. You are a wonderfully gifted man. Surrender."

"I swear I ain't Jesse!"

"That won't do."

"If you ever saw Jesse James, you ought to know I ain't him."

"Oh, come off, that won't do, my fine fellow."

"It will have to do."

"Drop that gun!"

Sam Hilderbrand saw that he could not use his rifle save as a club. He sprang at the detective, and aimed a blow at his head. So quick was his movement that any other man would have been brained. But Carl Greene, with a marvelous rapidity of action,

suddenly leaped backward, and at the same time pulled the trigger of his revolver.

Crack!

At the very moment he fired the butt of the gun struck his pistol from his hand and the bullet went wild.

Carl Greene had not time to draw another, but seized the muzzle of the rifle.

"Oh, hold on there!" cried Hilderbrand.

"That is just what I am going to do," Carl Greene answered. Hilderbrand felt safe.

He had never yet been overpowered in a hand-to-hand fight. But he had never met Carl Greene before. While the detective was much smaller than the outlaw, he was a wiry man, and every muscle on his limbs and body seemed strings of steel.

Carl Greene had the muzzle of the rifle, and Hilderbrand had the butt.

The struggle which followed was simply terrible.

Each man realized the awful fact that he was struggling for life. In ten minutes more at the most one or the other would be dead.

Carl Greene took care that the muzzle of the gun should not be placed against his body.

He gradually got near to the bandit, and struck him a stunning blow with his fist. Hilderbrand staggered backward, and, uttering a roar like an enraged bull, bounded toward him, striking wildly in the air.

Carl Greene avoided the tempest of blows as well as he could.

Then the two men dropped the gun and grappled with each other.

They fought more desperately than before. Neither had an opportunity to draw the knife and pistol which they carried in their belts.

Though Hilderbrand had the advantage in height and weight, Carl Greene was his superior in activity and strength.

At last they fell. The most scientific wrestler could not have told which had the advantage of the fall.

Suddenly, while they were still locked in the death struggle and too much overcome to speak, they heard wild shouts, and a party of young hunters from St. Louis suddenly burst upon the scene.

"Hello, Bob, here's a pretty go. Be jemany, here's two men trying to cut each other's throats."

"Separate 'em, boys: don't let 'em fight!" cried another.

In a twinkling half a dozen stout young fellows had dismounted and torn the combatants apart.

Both Carl Greene and Hilderbrand were too much exhausted to speak and explain what they had been engaged in doing.

"Say, Bob, it won't do to let them together again, or they'll kill each other. You take that fellow off with you and we'll take this one."

Hilderbrand heard this command with no little pleasure. He managed to stoop and pick up his rifle as he was dragged away.

When he had gone about a mile he recovered his breath and at once began to plead with the young men to release him.

He told them a very plausible story about his being on his way across the country to get the doctor to come and see his sick child, when he met Jack Snipes. He and Jack had had a quarrel some time before, and that Jack assaulted him. He protested against fighting, as he didn't want to fight Jack. But nothing but a fight would answer, and they went at it. Now that he was away from him he wanted to go after the doctor and get him back before his sick child died. He pleaded so earnestly that they were constrained to let him go.

He no sooner had his liberty than he disappeared into the deep wood with his long rifle. Here Hilderbrand could laugh at Carl Greene or anyone else who might take it into his head to pursue him.

Hilderbrand had scarce got his liberty and disappeared than the other party with Carl Greene came up. The detective had made an explanation which opened their eyes, and they came back inquiring for the other man.

"He is gone, Bob," said one of the young hunters. "He said his child was sick and that he was on his way for the doctor, and he begged so earnestly for us to let him go that we had to do so."

"Well, you have played smash!"

"Why?"

"Have you no idea who you let slip from your fingers?"

"No, he didn't tell us his name."

"It was Jesse James."

"What?"

The utmost consternation prevailed among the hunters. They were white with rage at having permitted Jesse James to escape them.

But Carl Green had been outwitted. It was not Jesse James with whom he had had the death struggle.

It was several weeks before he learned his mistake, and then he discovered that the man he had fought was in fact as great a desperado as Jesse James and, if possible, even more deadly.

Meanwhile Sam Hilderbrand was making his way to his cave.

When he reached it he found the James boys enjoying a quiet game of poker.

"Hello, Sam! Where have you been?" Jesse asked.

"Wrestling with a friend of yours."

"Who?"

"Carl Greene!"

"What! you don't mean it?" cried Jim Cummins.

"I certainly do."

Jesse James was silent for a few moments and then he said:

"Well, so that fellow still lingers around in this country suffering with the delusion that he can capture us."

"So it seems."

"I will cure him of the hallucination."

Sam Hilderbrand gave Jesse an earnest look and said:

"Well, Jesse, if you had such a tussle as I had with him you would have thought it more a case of real madness than anything else that you might compare it to."

"I have had the pleasure of wrestling with that gentleman on several interesting occasions."

"Don't he make it interesting for you?"

"Rather."

"Have no time to pick strawberries on the way."

"No, nor go fishing either. But Carl Greene is a talented young fellow; nevertheless, he will have to be dealt with. I think that the best thing that we can do with him is to quietly and peaceably kill him. He has actually carried things too far."

"I agree with you, and if I can get him at a range of two hundred yards with old Killdevil I shall take infinite pleasure in sending his soul to the happy hunting grounds."

Two days after the adventure above recorded Jesse James announced his intention to go and pay Madaline a visit. His brother, Jim and Sam Hilderbrand did all they could to dissuade him from doing so, but he was determined.

He saddled Siroc and left the cavern after taking all the precaution of Hilderbrand himself to see that the way was clear.

Siroc had been so long cooped up in his subterranean stable that he was pleased at the prospect of a dash over the wild country.

Over the stony hills and broken-up lands he flew and down along the valley. Jesse James' spirits rose with the gallop.

The morning breeze which fanned his cheek gave health and power to him, and as he galloped along he thought:

"It is worth one's while risking his life for such a ride as this."

He crossed the railroad which wound about among the endless hills of St. Francois County, and went to the little village of Stono. Riding boldly up to the saloon he called to the barkeeper whom he saw sitting within:

"Say, fellow, come out, I want to speak with you," he said.

The man in white apron and in his shirt sleeves came out on the porch.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"What have you to drink in there?"

"Anything strong or mild."

"Give me something mild. I will take it strong on my return."

He drew Jesse a glass of beer which he drained, and then wheeled his horse about to ride away.

"Hold on, stranger," said the saloonkeeper, running out and seizing his horse by the bit. Siroc not liking such rude treatment reared and plunged about viciously.

"What do you mean?" demanded Jesse James, indignantly.

"I want pay for that drink before you shall get away from me."

"Why, you rascal, do you intend to insult me?" cried Jesse. "Let go and I will pay you when I come back."

"No, I won't! you shall pay me right now. Come, come, you had just as well shell out!"

Jesse's eyes flashed a deadly fire as he drew from his pocket a dollar in silver, and slinging it at the saloonkeeper said:

"There, take that for the present, I have not time to settle with you for a while," and the bandit king wheeled his horse about and rode away.

Jesse James' life was made up of curious and daring incidents. He was an inconsistent character. At times he exercised the utmost prudence, and at other times he was strangely reckless.

He passed the day in the woods. During the afternoon he amused himself by robbing Dr. Isaacs, of Stono.

When it was quite dark he called at the house of Mr. Firman McIlvane. Jesse dismounted when he was within half a mile of the house and made Siroc fast to a sapling. He then went toward the house, carefully reconnoitering the place as he went. He was forced to exercise the utmost caution, for he did not dare let old Firman McIlvane get a glimpse of him. McIlvane would have taken supreme delight in shooting Jesse James at sight.

He was at last at the fence which surrounded the house. He paused for a moment under a walnut tree to look and listen. At last he saw coming toward him a dark form.

"Pete!" he whispered.

"Yes, ah!"

"Is that you, Pete?"

"Yes, it am, massa. Am dat you?"

"Yes."

"What do Massa Jackson want?"

"Pete, is the old man at home?"

"Yes, boss, an' I tolle ye, massa, ye better not let him see ye, kase he want to kill ye."

"Well, Pete, I don't intend that he shall see me, but I want to see Miss Madaline."

"Oh, do ye, boss?"

"Yes, bad."

"How much bad, massa?" the mercenary negro asked.

Jesse James, who fully understood the mercenary nature of the negro, drew from his pocket a handful of silver, and said:

"Pete, hold your hand."

"Golly, massa, I'll hold my hat ef ye say so," grinned the negro, as the chinking coins fell into his hands.

"Now, Pete, I want to see Miss Madaline; when the interview is over, you shall have another handful!"

"Golly, boss, yer kin see her all night."

"But I depend on you to fix matters."

"Yer bet Pete will do it, boss. Does ye see dat house?"

"Yes."

"At de back of de house am a winder upstairs—d'yee see?"

"No, but I suppose I could see if I was on the other side."

"Bet yer could, boss. Now, in ten minutes dar will be a ladder at de back of de house, leadin' right up to de winder."

"Will anyone be in the room?"

"Yer bet dar will. When yer git ter de winder, it'll be raised by de purtiest gal in de whole country, an' den you climb right in an' talk wid her as long as yer want ter an' go away, an' de old man not know anything about it—see?"

"Yes; now go on, Pete, and play your part."

The negro went away, and for ten minutes Jesse James wandered about the place, hiding behind cowsheds and taking great care that none of the other negroes should see him.

When the ten minutes were up, he went to the rear of the house. Here an unexpected difficulty arose. It was Carlo, the dog, which had always been his favorite. Carlo scented him, and with a whine of joy and a glad bark of welcome, came bounding toward him. Jesse James had some regrets for the deed which he had performed the next moment, but it had to be done. He stood with his sharp-bladed knife in his hand, and as the dog came there was a thrust, a broken whine, and all was over. He dragged the body to some currant bushes and threw it away.

Wiping the blade of his knife on the grass, he went to the house, taking care that no one should see him as he went to the rear.

"The way seems clear," he said. He gazed to the right and left, and up and down the yard, but saw no one.

Woe unto any negro who should attempt to interfere with him at that moment. He would have shared a similar fate to poor Carlo.

Slowly and cautiously he began to ascend the ladder. He kept his right hand on the butt of a revolver, and at every step he paused to listen.

At last he gained the window above and paused to rap.

It was a very gentle tap that he gave the window. A moment later it was gently raised and he sprang into the apartment. It was not a large apartment, but was quite neatly furnished. A single candle lighted the room. The room was occupied by no one save Madaline. She gave him a glance, and in a low voice said:

"Don't speak above a whisper!"

"I will not," he whispered.

"Father would kill us both if he found you here."

"He don't like me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"He has an absurd notion in his head that you are not what you pretend."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, who does he think that I am?"

"Why, he actually believes you are one of the James Boys."

"Madaline, don't you know that that is wholly impossible?"

"That is just what I told papa, but he believes it to be true, and he says you are a murderer, and if you come here any more he will kill you."

"That is comforting, indeed, to me."

"But he don't know that you are here, and he shan't know it."

"I have no fears of your betraying me, Madaline."

"Madaline, I must have the secret to-night," said Jesse, with some little sternness.

"What secret?"

"The secret of the silver mine. I must know where it is."

"How can you?"

"I must by fair means or foul. Our happiness, my life, depends on it. Now you must help me."

"But, Mr. Jackson," the frantic girl said, "we can do nothing. Papa won't tell us where it is."

"He shall!"

"Shall?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say: he shall!"

She was now fully alarmed and began to cry. Jesse seized her arm, and said:

"Come, come. Madaline, this is time for action and not for tears."

"Oh, go away! Please don't cause any trouble to-night?"

"No, no. I came to have the whole thing over with to-night." Jesse James spoke so sternly and fiercely that he frightened her. She began to implore him not to harm any of her relatives. "Listen, Madaline, you shall call him up here. We will meet then alone, and we will talk the matter over. Before he leaves this apartment I will know where the hidden mine is just as well as he will."

"Oh, don't—" she began, but at this moment she was interrupted by a voice without crying:

"He is in there, is he? Well, by all I hold sacred he shall never get out alive!"

"Discovered!" hissed Jesse James.

"Go—fly for your life!" the girl cried.

Outside there was a perfect hubbub. Among the many voices and general uproar in the yard below could be heard the voice of Mr. McIlvane saying:

"He is in there. Hold your guns ready, boys, and blow his brains out just as soon as you get a sight of him."

Jesse James appreciated the fact now that he was in a pretty close place. He extinguished the candle.

"Go—fly for your life!" wept Madaline.

"Madaline, are you willing to help me?"

"Yes, with my life."

Jesse drew a revolver and put it in her hand, and said:

"You may have use for that."

"But it's my own father."

"Kill some of the negroes."

"I will if I can save you by doing so."

Jesse crept to the window and glanced from it to the yard below. It was full of men. His condition was by means pleasant.

"There are fully twenty down there," he thought. "And there is no telling how many more there may be."

Suddenly the voice of Mr. McIlvane indicated the plan of attack.

"Keep a close guard out there!" he said, "and I will burst open the door. I will then see if the scoundrel will make my house his home! Kill him at sight. He is Jesse James."

Jesse, now that he was discovered, determined to fight his way out. The girl became almost frantic with fear, and in a voice that trembled with emotion, said:

"Hold! don't fight. I will see papa and explain that you are not Jesse James."

"He will not believe you."

"Maybe he will."

"It will be no use to do so," Jesse declared, and he went to the window, which he raised and took aim at a negro standing below.

Crack!

Sharp and keen the first report rang out on the air, and without a groan the negro sank down to the earth dead.

"Who fired that shot?" demanded Mr. McIlvane, as he ran out to the scene.

"He did."

"Who?"

"Whoever is upstairs."

"Fire, kill him."

"But your gal is up there," said one of the white men who stood without, for Jesse James discovered that there were about as many white men as negroes outside.

"Never mind her; shoot! Fire!"

From where he stood Jesse James heard the loud click, click of gunlocks below, and he knew that a tempest of lead would soon come pouring through the window.

He sprang back from the window and seizing the girl's arm said:

"Stop, stop, don't go near the window!"

"Why?" she asked in a dazed sort of a way.

"There will soon be a tempest of death pouring in there. Keep back! Keep back!"

"Fire! why don't you fire?" roared the exasperated silver digger.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Three shots at first rang out, then one tremendous volley, and a perfect tempest of shot and bullets came pouring in through the window. The glass was shattered and flew like hail all over the floor.

"Down—down, crawl under the bed," said Jesse James.

The frightened girl obeyed him. In fact it was the only spot in the room where he could possibly be safe. The men below continued to fire into the window from which Jesse had shot the negro.

Jesse James could hear the old man below giving orders to one of his sons and a deputy constable who had come to help capture the bandit king.

"Watch those windows, and shoot the first man that shows his face. Whenever you see anything there shoot, whether it is a man or a woman!"

"But, pa, remember that Madaline is in that room."

"I don't care. Kill her. She is against me, she wants to betray my secret. Kill her as quick as any one if you have to get at Jesse James."

"We'll do that!" declared the constable.

Jesse James determined to get that constable, consequently he began to make another flank movement to get at the man whom he could just see standing by the side of a pine tree.

For some time the fellow was almost completely hidden by the pine, but at last he got a sight of him.

Jesse was standing up in a far corner of the room. The room being wholly dark, they could not see him, while he had an excellent view of them. He raised his pistol twice and aimed it at the fellow before he had a fair show.

He kept moving about so that a shot would be somewhat risky, but at last he became still for a moment, listening with his ear toward the window.

This was an opportunity not to be lost by Jesse James. The side of the fellow's head was toward him, and he took deliberate aim at it and pulled the trigger.

Crack!

Sharp and keen the report rang out on the night air, and the constable rolled over on his side with a groan, quite dead. The bullet had struck him above the left ear and gone completely through his head.

Again there was a panic.

"Stop, you fools!" cried the old silver digger.

But he might as well have tried to halt a herd of Texas cattle on a stampede.

The negroes were completely horrified, and a cannon would not have stopped them.

When once a negro gives way to a panic he cannot be rallied.

In vain Mr. McIlvane stormed and raved and swore the direst vengeance; his followers had almost all deserted him.

"Never mind, I will have him yet," he cried, and seizing an ax, followed only by his sons, he ran up the stairway and began to break down the door.

But Jesse James was not idle. He heard him coming, and as soon as the coast was clear below he ran to the west window, from which there was a matted bunch of trellised vines growing quite up to the window.

He climbed quickly out on these and began to lower himself down by them to the ground.

Down, down he climbed until he had reached the ground.

All the while he could hear the loud, ringing blows on the door above him, and knew that it would not last long.

Just as he reached the ground the door to the room in which he had been concealed gave way with a crash, and the old man and his son sprang in.

The silver digger's wrath can be better imagined than described on finding the bird flown. He dragged the frightened Madaline from her bed, and had not his son interfered for her no doubt would have killed the frightened girl.

"I will have him yet!" he roared, as he ran to the window, his double-barreled shotgun in his hand.

He espied Jesse James coolly getting over the fence. He deliberately raised his gun and took aim at him.

Bang!

The shot tore up a great hole in the ground a little to the left of the outlaw.

The old silver digger gave utterance to another exclamation of rage and cocked the other barrel of his gun.

Boom!

This barrel had a double charge in it, and the old man was kicked over on the bed by the recoil of the gun.

He got up in a great rage, and on looking out, discovered that the outlaw was gone.

"Where is he gone, John?" he cried.

"I don't know, pa."

"Don't know! Why didn't you look to see?"

"I was trying to bring Madaline to; she has fainted."

"Has she? Well, I don't care if she never comes to. I am going to kill that rascal before I have done with him yet. You see if I don't."

He sprang down the stairs, and, picking up his hat which had fallen off, he ran out into the night loading his gun as he ran. The

groans of the wounded and dying whom he left in his yard were all unheard by him.

All night long he made a wild, aimless search. In his rage and anxiety to kill or capture the man who had dared to make an effort to find his hidden mine, he was almost like a crazy man.

When dawn came he was like one almost exhausted. He sat down on a big log to think.

"Well, by Jingo, I guess that I had as well give it up," he declared. "I don't suppose that I can find the rascal. I have no fears of him, even if he is Jesse James. What is he to me? I want to kill him. He may frighten old Pinkerton and his detectives, but he can't scare me one bit."

He was still sitting on the log thinking and talking to himself, when he suddenly discovered a tall, fine-looking gentleman, with light-colored hair and whiskers almost brown, riding toward him.

"Good-morning, sir!" said the stranger, in a voice that was not in the least familiar to the miner.

"Howdy do, stranger!"

"Are you acquainted in this part of the world?" asked the horseman.

"Yes—somewhat."

"Well, I am very glad to know it, for to tell you the truth, my unknown friend, I am about as bad a lost man as you ever saw in your life."

"Where do you want to go?"

"To Stono."

"Well, you are on the wrong road to go to Stono."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Are you pretty well acquainted with the people who live in this wild country?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I met a man last night who tried to rob me," said the stranger.

"Don't you know who he was?"

"No."

"Well, I do. I'll bet it was Jesse James."

At mention of the name of Jesse James the stranger on horseback suddenly turned deathly pale and said:

"Oh, I hope that terrible outlaw is not in the country!"

"Yes, he is, and there can be no doubt of it. I guess I ought to know when I fought the infernal scoundrel all night last night. Where did you meet him?"

"Please, sir, I don't know. I was a stranger in these woods, but seems to me that it was a good way from here, and he came upon me all at once like. He was riding a big black horse, bigger than mine."

"Was he on horseback?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know that Jesse had a horse; but I guess that he did. I heard that he never went far without his horse Siroc."

"Is that what he calls his horse?"

"Yes."

"Then it was him, for I remember now when we started to run through the woods and he tried to catch us and couldn't do it, he bawled out:

"Go it, Siroc, are you going to have it said that you were beaten?" and then for a few minutes, I declare, stranger, I was afraid that my Nightshade was going to be run down. But he wasn't. Nightshade has never been outrun yet."

"Do you mean to say that you outrun Siroc?"

"Yes."

"Well, stranger, that horse of yours is worth more than my silver mine."

"Have you got a silver mine?"

"Now who said anything about a silver mine?"

"You spoke as if you had one. Have you?"

"No."

"I heard that some one in the neighborhood had found a silver mine. Now who was it?"

"I don't know."

"I heard it."

"I reckon ye heard a lie."

"Where do you live?"

"About ten miles from here. Go east till you get tired, go west till you come to a mountain, then south until you come to a bluff, jump off it and break your neck if you want to. I don't take strangers to my house."

"I didn't say I wanted to go. But I am an assayer, you know. sent from St. Louis to assay some silver ore for a Mr. McIlvane: do you know such a person?"

The silver digger gave him a curious look and said:

"I didn't send for no assayer."

"Are you Mr. McIlvane?"

"Well now, that ain't none o' your business! Do you just go on?"

"Oh, no offence, sir. I assure you I meant no offence. If you don't want me to assay your silver I will not."

"I ship all my silver in the ore. Let them assay it in St. Louis."

"Very well."

"Now go on to Stono."

The stranger, who seemed a little perplexed, as any stranger might be at the strange conduct of the Westerner, turned his horse about and rode away.

No sooner was he out of sight than he drew rein and a peculiar smile flitted over his face.

"Siroc, we outwitted the old fellow that time and now we will have to play some sharp game or he will get ahead of us yet."

The horseman was Jesse James. Satisfied that his disguise would completely deceive the old man, he proceeded to make a complete change of disguise. This time he made up as a country peddler with a large pack, and, leaving Siroc in the dense wood, he one night appeared at the house of the old silver digger and asked to stay over night.

The house had a very different appearance from what it had worn on his former visits. It still showed signs of the ravages of the war.

The old silver digger did not like to take him in, but he begged so earnestly that he might be taken in to stay all night that Mr. McIlvane was induced to permit him.

"I don't often keep strangers."

"Why?"

"Because this ain't no tavern."

"I know that, my good man, but don't you know that the good book says that ye should be careful to entertain strangers lest ye entertain angels unawares."

"Yes, but in this land you are more apt to entertain demons unawares than angels," growled the silver digger.

The thrust was a keen one, and for a moment Jesse James gazed at the man as if he were trying to read his thoughts.

"I wonder if he really does suspect me?" he said to himself.

But the bandit king of America had his features too well schooled to allow the silver digger to suspect that he was in the least suspicious of him.

Jesse saw nothing of Madaline in the early part of the evening, and he naturally felt some curiosity to know what had been her fate.

Had her father in his wrath slain her, or had she been spirited off to some convent to spend her days in solitude and penitence?

After supper he lighted his pipe, as any traveling vender of table linens might do, and went out upon the porch. He had not been there smoking long before he espied a form moving slowly to the rear of the yard.

The grim, gray, uncertain twilight was just preceding the more sable cloak of night, yet it was light enough for him to make out the form. He saw that it was a woman.

The features were, of course, indistinguishable, but he saw that she was the same size as Madaline and he knew it must be her.

Jesse resolved on a bold scheme.

He waited until she had disappeared behind a cluster of rose bushes, and then ascertaining that no one was watching him he went quickly to her side.

"Madaline!" he said, in his natural voice.

"What, you here?" she gasped.

"Yes."

"Begone!"

"Why?"

"You are foolish to come here at such a time."

"I don't understand you, Madaline."

"Don't you know that you have been discovered? It is now known that you are in reality Jesse James, the bandit king of America."

"Well, if I am, Madaline?"

"I will have nothing more to do with you."

"Why?"

"You have deceived me. You have brought death and murder to our home."

"But I was attacked."

"You had no right to put yourself in a place where you would be attacked."

"I came to see you."

"Yes, to tell me a lie. To tell me that you were Mr. Jackson, an honest single man, while you were Jesse James, the outlaw chief."

"Madaline, you won't betray me?"

"No, but you must go away from here."

"Let me stay until morning?"

"Let you stay until morning; yes, and you will be at some of your mischief before the morning comes, I'll warrant."

"No, I will not."

"I know your business here."

"What is it?" he asked.

"You are trying to find where father's secret silver mine is, but I will not tell you now, even if I should find out."

"Madaline, you, too, have turned against me," he said, in a voice so sad that it would have touched most hearts. But though it did touch the heart of Madaline, she was still unmoved. She gave him a look of indignation, and answered:

"Turned against you? Haven't I enough to turn against you? You came to this country, professing to be a single man, and made me believe that you loved me——"

"Which is true," interrupted Jesse James.

"No, it is not true. I can now see through it all. You never cared a cent for me. All you said was a black lie to get at father's secret. I shall not betray you until morning. You had better go then, or it may be all the worse for you."

And with a haughty air she swept past the brigand and entered the house.

Jesse James gazed after her with a look of fire in his eyes. After a few moments he said:

"Curse the girl! I hate her now! I never cared anything for her before, but now I hate her!"

Jesse James was not capable of much gratitude. He seldom, if ever, appreciated a favor that any one rendered him. He had forgotten that this young woman had promised on one occasion to defend him with her own life against her own father.

That was before she knew, though, that he was a deceiver.

Jesse felt uneasy at the house that night. He felt quite sure that the eyes of the girl were all the time on him, and that she was watching him.

When morning came he had a conversation with Mr. McIlvane, in which he tried to sell him some of his goods. In the conversation he satisfied himself that the old man was going to the silver mine, although he did not say so.

"Never mind," said the bandit to himself; "I will make it convenient to lie in wait and watch him."

One mile from the house the woods were so dense that one could scarce see through them.

In this dense forest Jesse James concealed himself to await the appearance of the silver digger.

He did not come that day, and Jesse waited until the next. The reader may be curious to know how he existed without food. Jesse James had been a soldier during the war, and had learned the art of foraging.

During the dark and silent watches of the night he stole from the woods, and prowling about the farmer's smokehouse, and even burglarizing the kitchen, he managed to get sufficient food to supply him.

On the next day the silver digger was watched by Jesse. With the aid of a powerful field glass he saw him saddle his old white mule and start off through the woods.

"Now is my time," Jesse thought. "I will follow him to the very end of the earth or find out what he is doing?"

In a few moments Jesse had gone back to where he had left Siroc browsing on the bushes which grew very densely in the spot where he was tied.

Jesse quickly mounted his horse and prepared to follow the man on the white mule.

He concealed himself and his horse in some bushes until the man on the mule had gone along the path.

"The old miner has his pick with him," the outlaw thought. "There can be no doubt as to what his purpose is."

As Jesse James was stealing along behind the man with the white mule he did not see another personage stealing along behind him. It was a man mounted on a dark bay horse, who had yellow hair and light brown beard.

That man was Carl Greene.

There was a fine prospect for a lively time in the near future.

CHAPTER V.

THE HUT.

Jesse James took great care that McIlvane should not see him, and Carl Greene was just as careful that he should not be seen by the man he was shadowing.

Carl Greene kept a very respectful distance behind the bandit king, and his eyes never for a moment lost sight of him.

Suddenly the man on the white mule came to a pause.

Jesse stopped. Things began to assume a suspicious appearance as though the man on the white mule suspected that all was not right.

"I'll just get behind this tree and await developments," Jesse James thought.

There was a low scrub oak growing near, and behind this bushy tree the bandit king found concealment for himself and his horse.

His eyes were fixed so intently on the man on the white mule that he never for a single moment thought of looking back behind him at the man who was watching him. In fact, Jesse had not the faintest idea that he was being watched at all.

McIlvane was uneasy.

"I'll bet a hundred dollars," he thought, "that some hound is watching me. I just know that old Snorter acts as if he scented some one. Now I'm not such a fool as to go where there's ten millions o' money with a spy following on to my trail. I'll just lay low and see what makes Snorter so uneasy."

The mule still continued to sniff the air uneasily, and lashed his big ears about.

McIlvane tied the mule to a tree so that he would be concealed from view, and with his long rifle in his hand started back through the dense hazels which at this point grew to the height of ten and sometimes twenty feet.

"If I find a man following me I'll make it a blamed sorry day for him," the miner declared.

He had gone back almost two miles, and, not having seen any one, was on the point of turning back when he was suddenly startled by the sudden movement of an animal in the brush near him.

McIlvane could see no one, in fact he had seen no one, and was muttering:

"I guess old Snorter was mistaken this time," when he heard the trampling of feet about in the bushes.

"All right, I'll kind of investigate that," he declared.

He had gone past the point at which Jesse James was posted watching for him, and had come upon the point where Carl Greene was.

Carl Greene was unaware of the plan of Jesse James. He was shadowing the outlaw, and little dreamed that he was also shadowing some one.

Carefully parting the bushes with his hands as he went slowly along, McIlvane at last came in sight of Carl Greene, unobserved.

"Oh, ho!" he exclaimed. "It seems as if old Snorter was correct after all."

The miner cocked his gun.

There was a deadly meaning in his eye, and he had an arm that trembled not as he drew up his gun to take aim at the detective.

Woe be unto Carl Greene!

But often one's life is saved by what really seems to be a providential interference. The miner was a dead shot and no doubt had he been uninterrupted he would have been sure to have killed the detective.

"The rascal shall die!" he hissed. "He has followed me just far enough."

A young eagle and a hawk had been soaring about in the air above the woods. So much occupied were the men that they had not noticed them. Their screams, which were shrill and piercing, were unheard.

But the conflict of the birds was coming to a close.

The hawk suddenly pounced on the young eagle and then claw and sharp beak began the work of death.

They were unable to sustain themselves in the air, and just as the miner was in the act of touching the trigger which would send Carl Greene to eternity, the two combating birds fell plump down upon his shoulders.

Crack! sharp and keen rang out the report.

But the falling of the birds on his shoulders disconcerted his aim so that the ball which was intended for the head of Carl Greene only pierced the crown of his hat.

The shot was an astonishment all round.

Carl Greene was amazed to hear the bullet go whistling through his hat. Jesse was astounded to hear a shot fired from that direction, and the miner was amazed and covered with confusion at having missed.

McIlvane ran off into the woods, finally found his mule and returned home.

The scene of danger was now shifted.

The combatants were Carl Greene and Jesse James. Jesse had discovered Carl Greene soon after the shot, and with cocked revolver charged him.

Carl Greene was prepared for him when he came, and met him half way with a shot.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

One would have thought that an army was out on the skirmish line.

"Surrender, Jesse James!" cried Carl Greene.

Despite their disguises they knew each other.

"Oho! It is you!" cried Jesse.

"Will you surrender?"

"Never!"

"You had better. I will see that you have a fair trial."

"Take that!"

Crack!

The bullet from Jesse's revolver cut one of the false curls from the head of the detective.

The smoke hung thick in the woods and the combatants could not see each other more than half the time.

Through the thick smoke and thick foliage of bushes and trees it was impossible to tell where to send a bullet to make it fatal.

At last they both ceased firing as if by mutual consent.

The trees had been fearfully peppered with the bullets from both pistols.

Jesse coolly extracted the cartridges from his revolver and inserted fresh ones.

Siroc scented the battle, and stood with head erect and eyes almost starting from their sockets as he watched the foe.

"Let the meddlesome fool come on!" Jesse declared.

There followed some skillful movements. The two men were great strategists, and took every plan possible to get an advantage over each other.

But they were both as yet unhurt.

At last Carl Greene's watchful eye caught sight of Jesse James and he pulled the trigger.

Crack! went the weapon.

The moment Carl fired Jesse caught the glitter of the barrel of his pistol and threw himself down upon his horse, and thus saved his life.

The ball intended for his head went above him.

Jesse now returned the shot, and a few seconds later the detective found his horse sinking.

"What, can it be possible that my horse has been shot?" he asked himself.

Glancing at his side he found it covered with blood. A bullet from Jesse James pistol had gone through the side.

Carl dismounted from his steed and in three minutes the animal was dead.

"Well, here's a go!" he thought. "Alone, and on foot in this wood."

Jesse James soon ascertained that he had dismounted his enemy, and then having but little fear of him, he wheeled Siroc about and rode away.

Carl Greene was too dangerous game for him to amuse himself with, especially when he had such important matters on hand as the rich silver mine.

He went to where the white mule had been left tied, but the animal was gone.

Mr. McIlvane had come and got the faithful beast and returned home.

There was to be no mining done on that day.

Jesse left the locality as speedily as possible.

He had not gone a mile before Siroc began to prick up his ears, sniff the air, and at the same time give vent to a friendly whinny.

"What is it, Siroc, old boy? You must not make that noise here in the wood," said Jesse.

He was soon aware of the near proximity of some one. It was not long before he heard the careful tread of horses' feet well trained to cautious movement.

He drew rein a moment and listened.

"Some one is near, Siroc!" he whispered.

The well-trained animal seemed to understand what he said.

Jesse slipped from the saddle and crept forward a few feet. Before him was a dense cluster of hazels and tall grass mingled, forming one of the densest jungles that grows.

This he carefully parted with his hands, and looked straight ahead of him.

What did he see?

Jesse found himself looking right into the muzzle of a revolver not two feet from his face.

He did not start. He uttered no outcry, but stood firm as one who calmly sought death.

No one could be seen. Only a hand and the muzzle of the revolver. All else was hidden by the dense undergrowth of bushes.

But there was no question but that the man who held the revolver had seen at least an outline of his person, enough to get a fair aim at him.

For a moment silence fell on the scene.

Jesse dared not move or speak. The revolver was so close to him that he could not have drawn his own weapon without getting a shot from it.

At last a voice, in a low but earnest tone, said:

"Don't move!"

At sound of that voice Jesse felt a great relief.

"Jim—Jim Cummins," he said.

"What! Jess, is it you?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to get away."

"From whom?"

"Carl Greene."

"Is he close?"

"Yes."

Then there rose from the tangled, matted grass and bushes a small, wiry man with keen black eyes and dark mustache.

"Jim, where is Frank?"

"Not far away. I will call him."

Jim placed a small whistle to his lips and blew a short, sharp blast.

In a few moments they heard a rustling in the bushes, and Frank James appeared.

"Where are your horses?" Jesse asked.

"They are back a short distance."

"Where were you going?"

"Coming to look for you. You had been gone so long that we began to be afraid that something had happened to you."

"Well, I have had some pretty serious adventures, but I am all right, as you see."

"Yes."

"Get your horses."

They went away after their horses, and Jesse James got Siroc. When they met, Jim Cummins asked:

"Jesse, are you going to leave here now?"

"No, we must wait until we find the mine."

"We may never find it."

"Yes, we will. I would have trailed the old rascal to it had it not been for Carl Greene."

"I would feel safer in Clay County than in this terrible wilderness."

"We can't hunt safe places, Jim."

Jim was silent.

Jesse then related his adventures in detail to them, omitting nothing that had happened since he had left the cavern of Sam Hilderbrand.

"By the way, boys," he said, "what is Hilderbrand doing?"

"We left him in the cave."

"He knew you were coming?"

"Yes."

"Did he make any objection?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, does he intend to live in that cave?"

"I suppose so."

The James Boys all mounted their horses, and riding through the dense jungle soon came to a road.

"Are you going back to the cave, Jesse?" Frank asked.

"Not just yet."

They came to a fir path, which they followed for several miles.

Jesse at last said:

"Well, I suppose there is no danger of Carl Greene overtaking us. He is dismounted."

"Is he?"

"Yes. I accidentally killed his horse while trying to kill him."

"Sorry you made the mistake and did not kill the rider."

"I am too."

"Where are we now?" Frank asked.

They were certainly in the wildest, most terrible wilderness the James Boys had ever seen.

There are portions of St. Francois County still infested by the wild bear and panther.

All the dangers and inconveniences common to a wilderness are to be found in this land.

"It is growing late," Jesse remarked.

Jim Cummins turned his eyes to the skies, which were becoming somewhat overcast, and remarked:

"Yes, and we are going to have a tempest."

"I believe you."

"I wish we were in some safe shelter."

"So do I."

Frank James shuddered as the heavy roll of thunder shook the heavens.

"Jesse, can't we find our way back to the cavern?" he asked.

"I doubt it."

"What are we going to do?"

"Stay in the woods all night."

"Oh, horror! I don't believe we can live!"

"Oh, yes, we can."

At this moment there came on the air a wild cry resembling the screams of a human being in distress.

"Do you hear that!" Jim Cummins asked, tightening his rein and drawing his pistol.

"Yes."

"It's a woman in distress."

Jim Cummins was a gallant little fellow, and was called the ladies' man of the bandits.

With a smile Jesse James answered:

"No, Jim, it is no woman."

"Then what is it?"

"A panther."

"Is it possible? Panthers in these woods?"

"Yes, the hungry beast scents his prey."

"Who is his prey?"

"You."

Jim shuddered and clutched his pistol as his only friend.

Frank James became quite nervous and said:

"Jesse, let us try and get some better shelter than this, I don't want to pass the night in the woods if I can help it."

"Nor I; yet I suspect that I will have to do that."

They started along a narrow path.

The three men galloped along the dark path.

The wind howled down the hills through the woods like a shrieking demon which was bent on the destruction of the three men.

Darker and darker grew the night, and the tempest increased. All knew that the rain could not be long delayed.

At last Jesse James, who was in front, cried:

"Did you see that?"

"No—what was it?" both Frank and Jim asked.

"A house."

"Where?"

"On our left. Not a mile away."

"Let us get to it."

When the lightning was not painting the scene in burning red all was dark as pitch and the three brigands had to depend entirely upon the senses of their horses.

Those sagacious animals could see in Plutonian darkness, which baffled the eyesight of the outlaws.

At last another flash of lightning revealed a hut standing against the bank or steep face of a hill.

In fact the hut had been built against the hill, which evidently formed one end of it.

The James Boys could not at first tell whether it was inhabited or not.

"Let us get to it and see," said Jesse. "Be it occupied or vacant we will stop in it out of this storm."

A heavy peal of thunder at this moment shook the heavens.

A lurid glare of lightning lit up the awful scene.

The death-dealing tempest was tearing up great forest monarchs by the roots, and hurling them about in its fury.

But that hut was safe. It stood under the hill, in fact, against it, and a storm would have to blow away the bluff of stone before it could damage the hut.

At last they reached the door. Jesse sprang from his horse and gave a loud rap.

There was no answer. He struck the door a sharp blow and still no answer.

Jesse then pushed the door open and a flash of lightning revealed the fact that it was not occupied and had not been for years.

CHAPTER VI.

CARL GREENE WATCHING.

"Is there any one at home?" asked Jim Cummins.

"No, and there has not been for years!"

"Let us get inside, Jesse," cried Frank, for he knew that the torrents of rain could not long be delayed.

"All right, ride in."

"Bring in the horses, too?"

"Yes."

"Is it large enough?"

"Of course it is."

The door of the hut was almost as large as a barn door. The floor was made of stout puncheons and so thick that it was capable of bearing up the horses."

They rode into the hut.

"Now, boys, we must have some fuel and brush in here to give us a light," said Jesse James.

"You are correct, Jesse. It would be very dark and disagreeable in here without any light."

"I believe that I can get in some wood and pine knots before it begins to rain."

"You will have to hurry."

Jesse sprang from his horse and ran out into the wood which grew quite dense close up to the hut.

In a few moments he returned with his arms full of pine sticks, and what was better still, pine knots.

"Have you a match, Jesse?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

In a few moments he had a brilliant blaze from one of the pine knots.

Jesse was not a moment too soon in getting in the wood, for in

a few moments after he entered the rain began to fall in torrents.

The rain was accompanied by a fearful wind and incessant thunder and lightning.

"Ah, this is comfortable quarters," Jesse James remarked, as he gazed about the hut.

"It don't leak a drop," put in Jim Cummins.

"You are right."

"I wonder who built it?" said Frank James.

"I don't know."

"Nor do I care," added Jim.

It was a curious-looking hut.

There was a vast fireplace in one end.

The interior seemed larger than the exterior. There was some furniture in the hut, consisting principally of benches and stools, with one table.

Jesse scanned the hut over, and said:

"Boys, I believe that this hut was built before the war."

"Why?"

"If it was not built before the war it was during the war."

"Give us your reason, Jesse."

"Because it is one of the best hiding places I ever saw. One might hunt for this hut a hundred years and not find it. It was by the merest accident that we came upon it at all."

"You are right."

"Then it is an oddly constructed hut."

At this Frank James started up, and said:

"Boys, let us take it for our own."

"What do you mean?" Jesse asked.

"Let us have it for a hut. The James Boys' hut. We have a right to it by the right of discovery."

"So we have, Frank," put in Jim Cummins.

"Very well," added Jesse, "we will make it our own property. We already have possession, which is a big thing."

"Look at those walls," said Frank. "Don't you see that they were made to turn bullets?"

"Yes."

"There are portholes with blocks to fill them when a shot is fired."

"You are right again."

Then the James Boys began to survey the apartment.

The more they examined it the more strange and mysterious it seemed.

Jesse struck the floor with his heel and was astounded to find it gave a hollow sound.

He said:

"Boys, there is a cellar beneath this."

"Let us look," said Jim.

They at once began a search. At last Frank found what he believed to be a trapdoor opening into the cellar, but he was mistaken. It was only a mark across the floor. He went to the west wall and began to sound it.

"What are you doing that for, Frank?" Jesse asked.

"I want to see if there are any sliding panels or false walls in the house, that is all."

"Sliding panels! false walls!" and Jesse James began to laugh.

"Now you needn't laugh. There might be, you know."

"No, there are not."

"You don't know."

"What good would a sliding panel do in a hut? And the idea of one of those walls made of logs being hollow is simply ridiculous."

But despite all Jesse's ridicule, Frank continued to sound the walls.

At last a most remarkable event transpired. It was nothing more than a section of the board ceiling at the wall falling out, revealing a dark door or passageway, going somewhere.

Astonishment for a moment held them dumb.

Jesse James was the first to speak.

"What in the name of old Sam Patch have you done?" he asked.

"Uncapped perdition," cried Jim Cummins.

"I believe you," Frank answered.

"What is it?"

"A door right in the hill."

Before them was a long, dark passage, the end of which they could not begin to see.

Jesse James seized a firebrand and began to look into the singular aperture.

"How far can you see, Jesse?"

"A hundred feet."

"Why, the hut is not over thirty feet."

"But this passage runs away back into the hill."

"Does it?"

"It must do it."

Frank, who had been scratching his head reflectively, said:

"Jess, I believe that I have got it."

"What?"

at the mouth of a cavern, and this hole we see here."

"A nice place I have arrived at."

Frank, who had been silent for the last three seconds, now spoke to the effect that they had better examine the trail to where it did lead.

"It is a splendid idea," said Jesse.

With lighted pine knots they began the exploration.

All three were about to enter Jesse James, who had splendid military ideas, said that one must stay on guard at the entrance.

"You are right, Jess, who shall it be?" asked Frank.

"Suppose you stay, Frank?"

"I'll do it."

Jesse and Jim, each with a lighted pine knot, and three more to light when the torches they carried had been burned, started in to explore the cavern.

It was a long, dark passage, and in places showed the work of tools.

It had been partially cut in the hard stone.

Jesse James went before.

"Jim, there is no knowing what is before us," he said, "keep your hand on a pistol and be ready for any sort of an emergency."

"I will."

"This is a long passage."

"Don't you see the end?"

"No."

"Don't it grow wider and higher?"

"It does."

"Jesse!"

"What, Jim?"

"I believe that we are coming into a larger cavern or grotto."

"Yes, we are."

"See, are not those white things stalactites?"

"They are."

"Then we are in a cavern."

"We are. My first prediction is true. We have a hut that was built in front of the mouth of a cavern. I see through it all now. The mouth of the cavern or the entrance to it, which is the long passage through which we have just entered, was too small, and the people who occupied it determined to enlarge it. That accounts for those marks which we saw where some one has cut the stone away."

"Hello! What is this?"

Jim went to a block of stone and picked up an old army musket which had been resting for years against it. But so dry was this cavern that the musket was not the least rusted.

A little farther on they found sixty stand of arms, stacked as if the soldiers had just stacked them and gone to their tents to get their dinner.

Cartridge boxes and belts with bayonet scabbards were on the bayonets of the guns. In the cartridge boxes were cartridges with the powder as dry as when it was first put into them.

"This is a little odd," Jesse remarked.

Jim Cummins examined the buckles on the belts of the cartridge boxes and said:

"Jesse, they have got the 'C.S.A.' on them. These were Confederate soldiers."

"Yes."

"It seems as if they were not far, and if any one would cry:

"'Fall in!' they would all come running to take their guns and form a line."

"But they won't, Jim. I have no doubt but that they have long since answered to the last roll call."

They went on a little farther and found a strange sight. It was three grinning skeletons sitting against the wall of the cavern, and at their sides were muskets, as if they had all perished on guard. A little farther on was another peculiar sight. It was the skeleton of a horse. The sinews had dried on the bones and held them together, and the skeleton was standing leaning against the wall.

"Jesse, this is horrible!" said Jim Cummins.

"Do you suppose the horse died in that position?"

"No, hardly. It was probably set up against the wall after it died."

"Let us go out."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but in this awful place I share some of Frank's superstition. I am half-afraid that some ghostly orderly will call out:

"'Fall in!' and then I will see skeleton soldiers running to take their places in front of those stacked arms."

Jesse James laughed. Jesse had not the least superstition in his composition. He often said that Frank had inherited all the superstition of the family and left none for him.

A careful investigation of the cavern convinced the bandit king that it had been used during the war of the great Rebellion by a secret company of Confederates for a hiding den. It was evident that a part of the men who had been there had died at their post.

Another thing was quite certain, and that was that the place had not been visited since the war.

"It will make a very secure hiding place for us, Jim," said Jesse James to his companion.

"Of course it will."

"If we should be trailed to our hut, we can come in here, and letting the panel down in front, no one would ever suspect that we were under ground."

"Jesse, maybe there is another outlet than the one through the cavern."

"Why?"

"Because the air here seems remarkably pure and fresh to depend on that narrow opening alone for its supply."

"Yes, you are right. I had not thought of that, Jim."

"If there is another outlet to the cavern, it is high time that we should find it."

"Yes, but we have not the time now to consider the matter. Let us go back to Frank and get some rest. One thing is quite certain, and that is that we will be perfectly safe here for the night at least."

"So we will."

They went back to Frank, whom they found sitting in front of the blazing fire, listening to the roaring storm without.

Frank had been dozing, but on their entrance he roused himself and began to ask a thousand questions.

Jesse answered all of them, telling him all about the marvelous cavern.

"Frank, I believe that you have been asleep?"

"No, I was just dozing, that was all. I was at the same time listening to the rain without. I could hear it very distinctly."

"Well, it won't do to sleep on guard."

"I wasn't asleep."

They then made arrangements to pass the night in the cabin.

Jesse took the first watch himself. Next came Jim, and then Frank.

Day came at last and the James Boys had some cold provisions in their saddle pockets, from which they made a breakfast.

"The storm has abated," said Jesse James. "Shall we try to get back to Sam Hilderbrand's cave, or had we better remain right here?"

"I don't know."

"Let us stay here for a while," suggested Frank. "The woods are so wet."

"They are damp, that is true, but we are out of provisions."

"Can't we forage?"

"Yes."

"Either of us three is good at foraging."

But during the forenoon it was decided to make another investigation of the cavern.

This time Jim Cummins was left outside on guard and Jesse James and Frank went inside to explore the cavern.

They traveled for fully five miles in the cavern without finding any end to it.

It seemed at last to split into a dozen different grottos, and Jesse declared that it would take a month to explore them all in detail.

When they returned Jesse James had found that the sky had cleared and the sun was shining brightly.

The horses were suffering for food, and they all took them out into the valley, half a mile away, and allowed them to graze for more than an hour until they had fully satisfied their hunger.

Then Frank was left at the hut, while Jim and Jesse James went out to forage.

The outlaws took great care to mark the locality so they would know it on their return.

"I have it now so I know I could find it blindfolded," Jesse James declared.

The first night out the two bandits slept in a dense wood. Next day they came to a valley that was densely populated.

This Jesse James declared was their opportunity. They at once began to lay their plans.

Of course they could do nothing until night came. So they concealed themselves in a dense wood and waited until all the world save watch dogs and evil-disposed persons like themselves were buried in sleep, and then they began to creep forth to investigate the larders of the farmers in the valley below them.

A large, old-fashioned farmhouse in the valley seemed to speak of plenty, and it was toward this that they first made their way.

Jesse suggested when they were within a fourth of a mile of the house, that they should dismount and leave their horses and proceed on foot.

They went slowly to a grove of trees, and dismounting tied their horses there. Then they crept carefully to the house.

The nearer they came to the house the more they became convinced that it was a place worth plucking.

The barns were actually bursting with grain.

There were stacks of oats and hay which would have made their horses glad.

They paused a moment by one of the large oat bins, and Jesse said:

"Jim, I'm going to feed Siroc."

"Feed yourself first."

"No, I won't. Here are oats, corn and hay. Siroc is hungry, and I am going to feed him."

"Jesse, we don't want to linger here too long."

"I know it."

"I hope you haven't forgotten that Carl Greene is in St. Francois County?"

"No. I am not liable to forget it soon, either."

But nevertheless Jesse was determined to feed his horse.

"Our horses can eat while we work, and the delicate little matter which we have on hand will require some little time."

"I know it."

They each gathered a great bundle of hay and filled their pockets with ears of corn, and the hats were filled with oats, and loaded thus, so that a person could have hardly told what they were, they started on their return to their horses.

The animals saw them coming and set up a quiet whinny.

Slipping the bits out of their mouths they allowed them to eat of the corn, oats and hay, while they set out for the farmhouse. They had come up to the rear of the house and were creeping slowly and cautiously forward, when they were suddenly startled by the angry growl of a dog.

"Jim, we've got to dispose of him!"

"Yes."

But that was no easy matter to do.

The dog was a little shy and seemed to prefer keeping at a distance and growling than to approach and bark.

They crept to the smokehouse and there tried to coax the animal to come within reach of their knives, but he was not inclined to do so.

After a long time, however, Jim got his attention engaged, while Jesse crept up to windward of him and drove a knife to his heart.

The way to the cellar was now clear.

Jesse gave the signal and Jim joined him.

"Where now?"

"The smokehouse first."

They found it locked, but they had expected this, and as it was only locked with a padlock, they managed to easily force it open.

Jim remained outside to watch, while Jesse went softly in the building. He had a dark lantern which he lighted. Turning on the light of the lantern, he saw the whole rafters hidden with strings of bacon and hams, the savory odor of which was quite tempting. There were stored away abundance of fruit jellies, and in a big tin box was the last baking of the farmer's wife—six big wheaten loaves. Jesse appropriated first some bacon and ham and a large jar of jelly, then he got two big loaves. He found a flour sack, which he filled with potatoes. All this took some time and skill, for he was careful not to make any noise.

He handed these out to Jim, and proceeded to get a load somewhat similar for himself. Another bacon and ham, a jug of milk, a demijohn of home-made wine and more jam jellies, a cold pie, and more delicacies than a commissary sergeant on a foraging expedition would ever think of.

At last they were ready and started to return to their horses.

The James Boys had scarce left their horses the last time when there suddenly stole a man from the bushes. He had on a suit of light summer clothes and a straw hat. His coat concealed the belt and revolvers about his waist. The man was Carl Greene, the detective. He recognized Siroc, and lighting a cigar, sat down to wait the return of the bandit.

CHAPTER VII.

MADALINE SAVES JESSE.

Carl Greene sat waiting the return of the outlaws as coolly as if he had been waiting for his dinner.

Siroc was angry. He pawed the earth and sniffed the air.

"I don't think that this will do," said Carl. "The rascal will begin to neigh directly and then the mischief will be to pay."

He rose and went a little to windward of Siroc, where the animal could not see him.

"A cigar will not be a good thing on an occasion like this," he next thought.

He threw his Havana away and drew a revolver.

In a few moments he heard the sounds of footsteps approaching the tethered horses.

Siroc, who had ceased to champ his oats, now gave a low whinny as he scented his master.

"Confound the beast, he will spoil everything yet," said the detective.

They were so near now that he could actually hear the tramp of their feet, although they were walking with great caution.

At last he even heard their voices. Jesse was speaking in a low, guarded tone.

"Jim, I don't like the way Siroc keeps a-snorting round. It seems as if he scented something."

"Siroc is a very knowing horse."

"Yes, and he seldom ever gives a neigh that it does not mean something."

They said no more, but began creeping slowly and stealthily forward. From his place of concealment, the detective could hear them.

He crouched close to the root of a tree, where he could see without being seen.

Jesse James was on the lookout for danger, but he was puzzled. Though he strained his eyes and looked in every direction to see if he could see any one, there was not a sign of danger.

"Siroc, my good fellow, can it be possible that you are mistaken for once?" he asked.

"I believe he is, Jesse."

"If he is, it is the first time."

"Well, he might have heard some one going past."

"Poor fellow, I wish he could speak; he would be able to tell me what he had seen."

"Well, Jesse, let us mount and ride away from here."

"You are right; the sooner we get away the better."

In his hurry to mount, Jesse had failed to notice that his saddle girth had been cut almost in two.

At the least strain it would break.

This had been the work of Carl Greene. We had forgotten to state that Carl Greene had cut the saddle girth almost in twain before leaving the horses.

As Jesse put his foot in the stirrup to mount, Carl Greene suddenly rose to his feet.

Jim Cummins' quick eye detected his movement, and he cried:

"Quick, Jess, or we are lost!"

"Come on, boys!" cried Greene.

A wild yell rose on the air.

Jesse sprang at the saddle. The girth snapped.

Half a dozen shots blazed on the air as the saddle girth snapped; Siroc made a desperate leap to one side, and Jesse James was thrown down upon his face.

Half a score of men who had been in concealment suddenly rose and dashed at the horsemen.

Carl Greene was in the lead, and hurled himself on Jesse just as he began to rise. Jesse was already partially stunned, and Carl hurled him quickly to the ground.

Two stout men came to his aid and held the outlaw's hands.

The others went for Jim Cummins.

Jim saw them coming, and, drawing a pistol, fired at them. His horse was very much frightened, and leaped and plunged about in such a manner that his aim was inaccurate.

One bullet grazed a fellow's neck and another touched the shoulder of another, but only just enough to madden him.

He leaped at Jim Cummins with a yell of vengeance, and tried to seize his horse by the bit, but Jim was too shrewd to let him do that.

A touch of the rein, a little sting of the spur, and the animal went bounding away.

Some of the posse tried to capture Siroc, but the animal was too fleet for them. He seemed to realize that he could best serve his master by escaping from the detective's posse, and he went flying away into the woods.

As for Carl Greene, he clung to Jesse James with a vengeance, determined, whatever might happen, not to allow him to escape.

Jesse made a desperate struggle to get his hands free and draw a revolver.

"Hold his hands!" commanded Carl Greene to his assistants. "If he gets a hand loose and gets a revolver, it will cost some one his life."

"He shall not get his hands loose," said one of the men who was holding him hard and fast.

"See that he don't."

Carl felt in his pocket for handcuffs and in a moment drew a pair.

Click! Click!

"There, Jesse, you are quite safe now!" said Carl Greene. "Disarm him, boys, and let him up."

Jesse's revolver was taken from him, and he was allowed to rise.

"Jesse, were you hurt in the struggle?" Carl asked.

"No."

"I am pleased to know it."

"Well, I don't suppose it makes any difference to you."

"Why not?"

"The reward says dead or alive."

"But, Jesse, I am a humane man and would always rather capture alive than dead."

"But in my case it would be sure dead."

"Why?"

"Because capturing is one thing and holding after you have captured is another."

"I suppose you are correct. Nevertheless, Jesse, we will make sure that we hold you."

"That the future alone can tell."

Jesse James felt not a little chagrin to find that he had been taken in by Carl Greene, assisted by a few of the farmers and countrymen living in St. Francois County.

"I would rather Carl had done it alone, than to give these country clod-hoppers a chance to brag of having taken Jesse James, the bandit king."

Among the men who came to gaze upon the prisoner was Mr. McIlvane.

"So ye warn't quite as smart as ye thought ye was, were ye?" he asked, as he gazed at the prisoner.

"You can go away, I don't care to talk with you," the prisoner declared.

"No, I guess ye don't, but I'm not half done with you. Ye come to my house and ye raised a regular rumpus, and ye killed two niggers, which I guess you'll have to swing for."

At this Carl Greene interposed, and said that Mr. McIlvane's remarks to a prisoner were improper.

The next question which arose in the mind of Carl was where he should take his prisoner until he could get a regular warrant for him, and take him to Davies County to answer for the murder of Captain Sheets, whom he had killed in Gallatin while robbing a bank. Mr. McIlvane said it was but five miles to his house, where the prisoner would be secure.

"Very well, we will take him there," he said.

Jesse James was quite sullen.

Carl Greene, who realized what a slippery fellow he had to deal with, kept at his side.

"Jesse, do you care to talk with me?" he asked.

"Well, Carl, that depends on what subject you wish to discuss. If you wish to talk with me on religion, politics or any other metaphysical question of general interest, I will amuse you."

"But I would rather talk about yourself."

"I don't care to discuss personal matters."

"How long have you been here?"

"Ever since I came."

"And when was that?"

"The first day I reached the county."

"Come, come, Jesse; there is no need for any divergence in the matter. If you won't come out and answer my questions directly, say so."

"Very well, I won't."

"It might be better for you if you did."

"I have always heard," Jesse said, "that a still tongue made a wise head."

"In most cases that is true, but in this you might fare better if you were not quite so still."

When they reached the home of Mr. McIlvane Jesse James was placed in an apartment at the rear wing of the house, and two men placed as guards over him.

"What are you goin' to do?" McIlvane asked.

"I must go and make out a complaint before a magistrate, and at the same time send a telegram to the chief of police at St. Louis."

"Ye needn't be afraid o' leavin' him here. I'll have Tom and Jerry guard him."

"Can they be trusted?"

"You bet! They are brave as lions."

"And careful?"

"Yes, there ain't no danger o' them boys, at all, unless they should get drunk."

"Do they get drunk?"

"Every chance they get."

"Then we can't trust them."

"Yes, we can. I'll see that they don't get a single drop o' liquor."

"That will be the only plan that will be safe, Mr. McIlvane. Be sure to attend to that and see that they have not a single drop of whiskey."

"Oh, you bet I know just what I'm about, and I ain't agoin' to let 'em have a single drop."

"It would be well for you to take an occasional look after them yourself."

"I will."

With this assurance he left the prisoner in charge of the farmer and went away to secure the warrant and send the telegram.

Carl Greene did not feel very much at his ease. It occurred to him after he was half way to the magistrate's that it might have been safer to have brought Jesse along with him. He had a guide to show him to the house of the magistrate who was to issue the warrant, but on the way they got lost and wandered about for some time before they came to the house. The magistrate was asleep,

and, mistaking them for burglars, came very nearly shooting them before he discovered his mistake.

He finally admitted them and issued the warrant. Carl sent the constable back with the warrant and went to the nearest station to send the telegram, as he had been directed by the chief of police of St. Louis.

Meanwhile, some very interesting events had been transpiring back at the homestead of Mr. McIlvane. The old farmer, being somewhat tired, had retired rather early and after the departure of Carl Greene.

Tom, Jerry and the prisoner were alone in the room, which was in a wing of the house at a considerable distance from the apartment in which Mr. McIlvane was sleeping.

"Tom, how are you?" asked Jerry.

"Dry as a fish."

"Me, too."

"Tom, don't old Mac keep something good in the cellar?"

"Yes, but it won't do us any good."

Jesse James heard the short dialogue between his guards, and thought that in it he had a chance.

"Boys, are you both really dry?" he asked.

"Yes, Jesse James. Haven't you got a taste nowhere about you?"

"No; but I used to come to this house, and I know that in the cellar there is a big demijohn."

"I wonder if we could find it?" said Tom.

"We might," Jerry answered.

"You will have to be very careful," Jesse suggested, "or the old man will get onto the racket."

"Oh, don't you be afraid of us letting him into the secret."

At this moment Jesse James was somewhat startled by seeing a female form pass down the corridor past his door.

A second glance and he recognized her as Madaline.

"I wonder where she is going?" he asked himself.

Madaline gave him a curious glance. Could it be that she pitied him in his distress?

All the house was very still now. Madaline made no noise as she glided down the hall, and as the backs of the guard were toward her they did not see her.

Tom and Jerry were still discussing the merits of certain brands of whiskey when she again passed the door.

This time she actually paused long enough to give him a quick, meaning glance.

"What does she mean?" he asked himself. "Can it be that she has decided to befriend me, or has she come to gloat over my misery?"

She was only at the door an instant, and then she went away, and he sat for a moment listening to Tom and Jerry talking of the fine old applejack in the old man's cellar.

Suddenly Jesse again saw the form of Madaline at the door.

This time she gave him a glance which certainly meant a great deal.

Jesse James began to feel that his chances were better.

When she had again disappeared, he said:

"Why don't you boys go and get the whiskey? I am awful dry myself."

"Well, Tom, you try it."

"Jerry, will you watch at the end of the hall?"

"Yes."

"Then hurry," said Jesse. "I am so dry that I have been coughing up sand."

Tom rose and went to the end of the hall.

Jerry followed him.

"Do you think he is all right, Tom?"

"I believe he is, Jerry. There is not a man living that could break away from those handcuffs and chains."

"And I've got the key."

"No one could get him loose even if he had a friend."

"Not much."

"He is safe and sound."

Then the two listened for a time to ascertain if there were any one stirring.

Not a sound could be heard.

The maiden who was moving about was like a silent ghost. She had a mission to perform which required as much stealth as did theirs.

As they heard nothing and saw nothing, they concluded that they could make their way to the cellar and secure the much-coveted demijohn and get back without being seen.

"He can't git away, I know!" declared Tom.

"Of course, he can't," added Jerry.

There was an angle in the passageway, and when they had passed around the corner they were out of sight of the apartment in which the prisoner was.

Here they made another pause and held a short consultation.

"Tom, do you suppose he will tell on us?"

"Who?"

"Jesse."

"No, Jerry."

"Well, he seems as anxious to get a drink as any one of us, and I believe that he will keep mum."

"Yes, that's it. Mum is the word."

The two listened, and not hearing any one, decided to make the final trial.

One was to watch at the foot of a flight of stairs leading to the room in which the old man slept, while the other went to search for the cellar, and also to find some means to enter the cellar.

It is not our intention to give a temperance lecture in this story, but we have observed that a man who is addicted to drink will take almost any chance on earth to satisfy his appetite. He will risk his life, his honor and reputation in order to satisfy his appetite. Men who under other circumstances would not do a dishonorable thing for the world will do anything to satisfy their burning thirst for drink.

We will, for the present, take leave of Tom and Jerry trying to burglarize the cellar of the old farmer, and return to the prisoner whom they were supposed to guard with their lives.

Jesse James was glad to get rid of them.

He felt convinced that as soon as an opportunity offered itself, he would have an interview with Madaline. Although he had mistreated the maiden, had deceived her in a most shameful way, he was satisfied that she would have pity on him when she saw him a prisoner in the clutches of the law.

Jesse was correct.

He had been alone but a short time, when he saw Madaline suddenly appear at the door.

She glanced to the right and the left, and then came boldly to him.

"Madaline."

"Whisht, not so loud."

"Are they near?"

"Yes."

Jesse then lowered his voice, and said:

"Madaline, I did not think that you would let me die."

"I would not have any one die if I could help it," she answered.

"I knew you would not. I have been a bad man, Madaline, but I have never been as bad as I have been accused of being. I have robbed, it is true, but many men in society have done the same. There are two kinds of robbery; one is legal, and one is illegal. But the legal robbery is the most cowardly of all."

"That is true."

"What I have taken from the rich I have given to the poor."

"I have often heard that."

Madaline was a silly, sentimental, romantic girl, who was an excellent tool in the hands of Jesse James.

"You must not talk too loud," she said at last.

"Can you help me?"

"I will try."

That was enough for Jesse James. He knew that if she would try she could succeed. Jesse had been in so many bad scrapes in his life and got out of them alive and safe, that he thought if he could only get half a show he would succeed in getting out of this.

Madaline said to him that he must be very quiet, that their prospects were a great deal better than they had expected. Everything depended on the guard getting drunk.

"Do you think they will get drunk?"

"Just so sure as they find the whiskey, and I have arranged it so they will be sure to find it," she answered.

"Very good, Madaline—you are the best friend I ever had."

"It is no time to talk. Now is the time for action," she said. "Have those men the keys to your irons?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"One of them has them in his right pocket."

"That is all. They will be here in three minutes."

Madaline proved to be an excellent prophet.

She had scarcely disappeared from the doorway before he heard them coming. They were laughing to themselves, and chuckling at the pleasure in store.

Three times during the journey along the hall they had to halt and take a drink.

By the time they reached Jesse's apartment they were very merry.

They continued to drink, and at times became a little hilarious.

On such occasions Jesse James would caution them and assure them that the old man would come down and spoil their fun.

Tom declared that Jesse was a first-rate fellow, and that he was blamed sorry that they would have to stretch his neck, but that the good of his country demanded it.

Jesse flattered them by assuring them that he would think it a great honor to be hanged by such highly intelligent men as they were.

Jerry proposed three cheers for Jesse James, but Jesse objected on the grounds that they might rouse the old man, and that if they did they would lose all their fun.

Jesse James knew how to manage drunken men. He kept them quiet and stupor soon began to overtake them.

After a few moments both were sound asleep.

At the end of half an hour, Madaline appeared at the door again. This time she did not say a word.

She went to one of the men, and putting her hand in his pocket drew forth the keys and proceeded to liberate the bandit.

Jesse thanked her and made good his escape.

Jesse without horse or arms wandered through a dense wood throughout the night. At daybreak he found Siroc and got his revolvers from the saddle bags. He then held up a farmer, obtained a good gun and started for the cane.

Jesse traveled for two hours and met Hilderbrand. They then traveled together.

They met a posse, but by dodging in the woods escaped them and proceeded on their way.

"How far are we from the cave?" Jesse asked.

"Ten miles."

"I don't believe that I would ever find it alone."

"No, it takes a lifetime in these forests to learn their mysteries."

"Have you spent your life here?"

"Yes, ever since I was a boy I have lived in these forests, and I know mysteries unknown to men."

"Do you?"

"I know secrets which I shall never divulge. The cave is only a small part of the secrets of the woods."

They were still moving slowly and cautiously, for Hilderbrand did not think that they were still out of danger. He cautioned Jesse against mounting, as his head might be seen above the low bushes.

Suddenly he again commanded a halt.

"Wait here until I come back."

"Do you see anything suspicious?" Jesse asked.

"Yes."

This was all the more mysterious to Jesse James, especially as he strained his eyes and looked in every direction and was unable to see anything.

To him there was nothing, not even the unnatural moving of a bush, that could possibly excite the suspicion of any one.

Hilderbrand was gone about five minutes when he suddenly reappeared in an entirely different direction from which he had gone.

"Jesse, stay right here whatever may happen," he said.

"Have you seen any of them?"

"Yes, there is a guard to remove. If you hear old Killdevil speak you can know what it means. But stay here."

"I shall."

Again Hilderbrand disappeared. He had been gone about ten minutes, and Jesse James was feeling very uncomfortable when there suddenly came on the air the sharp report of a rifle.

Old Killdevil had spoken.

Five minutes later Hilderbrand was with him again.

"The way is clear," he said.

"Was there only one?"

"Yes, and he is buckling on his wings by this time, and tuning his harp."

Hilderbrand led the way down a bit of low land until they were in the densest kind of a wood, and there came to a short halt.

"Are there any more?" Jesse asked.

"No, but I was just looking at their trail, and I find it bad split up."

"Are any of them going toward the cave?"

"Yes."

"I wish that they had gone back."

Hilderbrand sat down on a log, remarking:

"We've got to wait here until them fellers come back. We don't dare to go on any farther now."

"Why?"

"Because we'll run right into 'em if we do."

After a few moments, Jesse James asked:

"Sam, do you think we can go on to-night?"

"Oh, no. They will not be back afore to-morrow noon, and we had just as well make up our mind to wait right here."

"All right."

The sun was already low in the heavens, and Jesse removed the saddle and allowed Siroc to graze on the grass which grew in abundance among the trees.

Hilderbrand went a short distance and killed a deer. He brought it in, and skinning it, cut off some of the choicest steaks to broil on the coals.

Jesse had kindled a fire and was sitting before it when he came.

They were sitting at supper, when there suddenly came on the air a cry.

"Did you hear that?" Jesse asked.

"Yes."

"Is it a panther?"

"No, it is a human being."

All was silence for a few moments, when there again came the cry.

This time it seemed to take the form of words, and Jesse said:

"There is no question about it now. It is a man."

"Yes, I know it is a man."

They listened again to hear the distant call; each man instinctively laid his hand on a weapon.

Siroc tossed his head in the air and sniffed suspiciously, as if he scented a foe at no great distance.

After about five minutes they heard the cry again.

This time the words could be plainly distinguished.

"Lost! lost! John Russel, of Howard County, lost!"

"I can make out the words," said Jesse.

"So can I."

"I wonder if he is lost?"

"Guess so. Ef he ain't he's a-lyin' for no purpose."

"Men often do."

It soon became evident that the man was coming closer. There was no need to answer his call, for if he continued the course he was going he would soon come right upon the campfire.

"Keep still!" cautioned Hilderbrand. "The fool will be right on us soon."

Hilderbrand, taking his rifle in his hand, stole away from the campfire, and went to some trees in the direction from which the man was coming, bawling lost as loud as he could.

The man saw the campfire at last and came toward it, changing his tone.

"Joy! joy! joy!" he cried. "John Russel, of Howard County, found!"

An arm suddenly shot out from behind a tree and seized him by the throat, while a gruff voice cried:

"Stop, tenderfoot, the day o' judgment's come and you're not saved."

"Oh, dear—oh! oh! please don't harm me!"

"What are ye bawlin' so about?" demanded Hilderbrand, dragging a young man forward into the full glare of the campfire.

He was evidently not much accustomed to traveling in the forest, for he wore store clothes and had the air of one who had passed his days in the urbane atmosphere of a country store.

"Say, say, mister, don't do that, don't hurt me, I—I, really did not mean to intrude, but I—I, oh, dear, what are you going to do?"

"Sit down!" commanded Hilderbrand, in a voice like half muffled thunder.

Down he dropped on the log and gave Jesse James, who now stepped forward, a strange stare.

"Now, sir, give an account o' yerself," said Hilderbrand.

"Oh, yes, I—I—I will!"

The poor fellow was so frightened that his teeth chattered in his head.

"Who are ye?" demanded Hilderbrand.

"John Russel, from Howard County."

"What are ye doin' down here?"

"I am a hunter, sir. I came down here to hunt for blg game and got lost."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE HOUSE.

Jesse James scanned the hunter carefully, and tried to discover something familiar about him. Jesse had been in Howard County a great deal, and had never seen or heard of such a person as Mr. John Russel. But the fellow seemed to have all the peculiar idiosyncrasies of a Missourian.

"I think that he must be genuine and what he claims to be," the final mental conclusion at which Jesse James arrived.

"So you are John Russel?" asked Hilderbrand of the hunter, who sat shivering like one frightened out of his wits.

"Yes."

"Lord John Russel?"

"Yes."

Both Hilderbrand and Jesse James roared.

The fellow was so much intimidated that he had really forgotten who he was. At least that was the very logical conclusion at which the outlaws arrived.

Poor Russel, he suffered much that night. When they had tired of tormenting him, they wrapped themselves in blankets and lay down to sleep.

Since had the little camp become composed when Hilderbrand suddenly touched Jesse.

"What is it?" Jesse asked.

"P'r."

"Sure."

"Just lay still. I'll go and kill it and bring it in for our breakfast," said Hilderbrand.

The outlaw, with his famous rifle, stole away from the camp noiselessly that he did not even awake Russel.

Jesse James was very sleepy, and despite all his efforts he could not keep his eyes open.

In a few moments he was dozing.

Suddenly there was a peculiar movement on the part of the lost hunter, Lord John Russel, as he was ironically termed. He raised his head. His eyes were as wide open as if he had never been asleep.

He sat up. He looked at Jesse James and saw him sound asleep, and then Lord John began to feel rather suspiciously in his pockets.

Strange to say, he drew forth a pair of handcuffs. Now what in the world could he want a pair of handcuffs for? In that wilderness a hunter would certainly not need a pair of handcuffs. He rose to his feet.

All his actions were singularly suspicious.

Jesse still slept. Russel seemed to float about without touching the ground. He went quite up to Jesse James. The bandit slept as sweetly as if his own mother were guarding him.

The lost hunter might have had something soothing in his touch. At any rate he did not awaken Jesse James.

He slept so soundly that the hunter bent over him and gently touched his wrist. There is a certain way to touch a sleeper and not wake him. It must not be a strong, vigorous grasp, nor must it be a slight touch. It must be a soothing, caressing touch that makes the sleep more profound.

At any rate, the lost hunter had the art of handling even as light a sleeper as was Jesse James without awaking him.

Jesse snored while he gently lifted one hand after another and placed them in the handcuffs, and closed and locked the handcuffs so neatly and completely that he did not awake the sleeping man.

It is an astonishing fact, so deftly did he manipulate the handcuffs that he had Jesse completely handcuffed without awakening him.

His work was not yet done.

Drawing a stout cord from his pocket, he quietly tied his legs and then secured him to a tree.

Then Russel coolly took from his pocket a cigar which he lighted and sat down to smoke until his prisoner should awake.

Jesse still slept.

"Sleep on, Jesse James, sleep on! you will need all your strength, for we have a long journey before us."

The lost hunter was none other than Carl Greene. He had played a very clever trick on Jesse James; he had completely deceived him by this new disguise.

Now while Carl was deceiving Jesse and was playing a very fine piece of business in one place he was losing in another.

Carl Greene did not even yet understand Sam Hilderbrand. He failed to have a just appreciation of the merits of the man.

Hilderbrand had been racing after a bear, and Carl Greene sat smoking holding a cocked rifle in his hand awaiting his return, intending to treat him to a very liberal surprise.

It has been doubted by good authority that Carl Greene even knew that the man was Sam Hilderbrand.

If he did know it was him Carl was quite sure he could cope with him. He was prepared certainly to take any ordinary man so completely by surprise that his capture would be a very easy thing.

But he did not calculate on the habitual caution of a man who had been for twenty years a fugitive, and whom the shrewdest detectives on earth had never been able to capture. Hilderbrand did not return in the way and manner that Carl Greene naturally supposed he would.

He stole back through the bushes and was standing behind the detective before he was aware of his presence.

But Hilderbrand from his position could not see that Jesse James was handcuffed and an unconscious prisoner.

"Hello, Rus, awake are ye?" said Hilderbrand.

Carl Greene bounded to his feet, cocking his gun as he did so, for he knew that he would have to fight for his life.

"Surrender!"

"Not much!"

"Crack!"

As Carl fired, the barrel of Hilderbrand's rifle struck his own and the ball buried itself in a tree.

The shot and noise awoke Jesse James, who began a frantic struggle with his bonds. He tore at them and tried his best to break loose by breaking the cord at his feet, but it was not in his power.

Meanwhile, one of the most desperate struggles that had ever been seen between two men was going on.

Hilderbrand tried to shoot Carl Greene, but the detective caught the barrel of his rifle and the shot was turned aside.

Blows that would have killed a bull were struck, but didn't hit the mark.

The struggle went on. The men fought like madmen. Both were in fact taken completely by surprise, and had no idea that the conflict would be at such close quarters.

Hilderbrand never engaged any one at close quarters if he could help it. As the reader knows, this was the second time he and Carl Greene had fought hilt to hilt. He was mad and desperate, and Carl Greene seemed to realize that everything depended on the conflict.

In their struggle the two men got some distance from the campfire. There was a great, deep ravine which in their anxiety to overthrow each other neither saw. At last they were right on the verge of it, and in a moment both toppled and tumbled over it.

Down, down they went, right to the very bottom of the ravine. In the fall down the rugged sides of the ravine they became separated, and both were somewhat stunned. Carl Greene, recovering, crawled a little farther and fell into a deep pool of water from which he narrowly escaped drowning.

When he did crawl out of the water his clothes were drenched to the skin and his revolvers were wet and useless.

Of course he had lost his rifle in the scuffle, but that was of very little consequence. He had carried it only as a blind. His pistols were the weapons on which he most relied.

When the detective found himself helpless he very prudently determined not to attempt another attack on the camp. He crept up close enough to it to see that Hilderbrand had gone back to Jesse and was doing all in his power to release him.

Finding that he could do nothing, Carl started off to get some recruits and to supply himself with reliable weapons and ammunition.

We will take leave of Carl Greene for the present and give our attention to Jesse James.

"How did all this happen?" Jesse asked when Hilderbrand came back and began to liberate him.

"That Lord John Russel wasn't such a big fool as we took him for, Jess."

"What, was it he?"

"Yes, and now, Jess, I'll bet a jill o' buttermilk agin two pickled jay birds that that Lord John Russel was an old acquaintance o' yours."

"Carl Greene?"

"Yes."

"Hilderbrand, I begin to see through it now!"

"So do I: and a good way through it, too."

"Can't you get the handcuffs off?"

"No, I have no key."

"But he has one."

"Yes. but he is in the black pool. I saw him plunge into the water, or I mean that I heard him, for it was too infernal dark to see anything."

"Then how am I to get these off?"

"Well, Jess, I was once a blacksmith, and I have cut iron much thicker than that, but now I have no tools."

"I don't know what I am to do."

"Maybe I can file 'em in two."

"File them in two, how?"

"Hain't ye got a watch?"

"Yes."

"Do it with the mainspring o' the watch."

"Can you do it?"

"If your watch is any account I can do it."

"It is."

Jesse took from his vest pocket his elegant gold watch and gave it to the outlaw.

He quickly opened it and extracted the mainspring, and then, with that instrument, set diligently to work to cutting off the handcuffs.

It was a long, tedious job. To those who may be skeptical about this part of our story, we will state that there are instances on record of prisoners cutting their iron gratings with the mainspring of a watch.

At last Jesse was liberated, and the two outlaws went five miles farther and remained until morning.

As nothing had been seen of Carl Greene in the meantime, they began to hope that they were done with him for the present. They had come within five miles of the cavern, when they suddenly came upon a posse of men, twenty strong.

"Jess, we're in for it now," said Hilderbrand.

"Sam, we must separate."

"It's our only chance."

"Look for me among the blue hills when this is over."

"I will."

With wild yells the posse, some on horseback and some on foot, came thundering down upon them.

To escape was the easiest thing imaginable with the outlaws. In

fact, they never had the least apprehension from the very first that they would not escape. In the woods Hilderbrand on foot had nothing to fear, and Jesse James knew full well that there was no danger of any man or beast, on any kind of ground, keeping long within sight of Siroc.

Nine men, mounted on excellent horses long accustomed to this wild, mountainous country, gave him chase.

After running about twenty miles he managed to shake them off. Jesse James was now in a peculiar situation. He had been chased into a part of St. Francois County entirely new to him.

But he found a well-beaten road running along the ridge.

Not a soul had he seen that day, but the road bore evidence of having been traveled some time in the recent past.

Jesse James spurred his horse forward and soon came to a two-story cabin on the bank of a river.

By this time it was almost dark. Jesse glanced all about the strange and isolated habitation, and could not see a single person near it.

He cast his glance toward the west, and saw that the storm must soon burst.

"Hello!" he called.

No answer. Not even a dog barked or a cat mewed.

"Confound the house. It certainly looks as if no person had ever lived here."

He dismounted before the house and knocked loudly.

"Thar ain't no need ter knock," said a voice at his side, and turning about he saw in the thickening gloom a young girl.

"Why?" he asked.

"Ain't no un in thar but granny, au' he's deef ez a post when he don't want ter hear."

"Well, girl, you see the storm coming?"

"Reckin I do, tenderfoot. Most any blind nigger could see that."

"Can I stay all night in this house?"

"Yes."

"What will I do with my horse?"

"Put him in ther barn."

Jesse James looked about on every side and not a sign of a barn could he see, or anything resembling one.

"Where is your barn?" he asked.

"Over the hill."

She pointed with her finger over the hill, and Jesse said:

"Well, who will show me to it?"

"I'll take yer hoss."

"No, you can't manage him, sis."

"Can't manage him! great guns, tenderfoot, yer don't know me a leetle bit; why, I can handle the wust hoss as ever was."

"But this horse will allow no one but me to handle him, and, besides, I cannot get in the house until you come back and let me in any way; so do you just go on and I will follow and lead the horse."

She led the way along a very narrow path hidden by a dense thicket, through which they had to actually squeeze themselves in order to get through.

"How far is it to your barn?" asked Jesse.

"Jist over the hill."

Jesse was almost out of patience, and on the eve of declaring he would go no farther, when the girl suddenly turned out into a small clearing in which was a long stable and a cornerib.

A stack of hay was near the cornerib.

"Hyar yer air, pilgrim, put yer annermil in thar, an' I'll bet thar ain't er hoss thief in Missouri ez will find him."

"Will I be able to find him in the morning myself when I want him?" Jesse asked.

"Wall, ef yer can't find ther way back hyar yerself, I'll show yer."

"Very well. I will trust you."

He put the horse in the small stable, gave him eight ears of corn, and then asked the girl to pilot him back to the house.

"I tell yer, pilgrim, we've got ter hustle, so we hev, ur we'll git cotted in ther rain."

"Well, hustle."

"Come on."

The clouds now seemed to hover about the landscape so darkly as to preclude the rays of the sun even if it had been shining.

But the sun had set and the twilight gave way almost in a moment to pitch darkness.

"Kin ye see?" asked the girl.

"No."

"Gim me yer hand."

She took his outstretched hand and hurried with him down the steep and thorny path, and in due time they reached the house.

They did not reach it a single moment too soon. Just as they gained the door they heard a loud burst of thunder, and the rain began to fall in torrents.

The girl gave the door a peculiar twist and the door flew open. Seizing Jesse's hand she pushed him into the dark apartment.

"Jist yer wait, pilgrim, till I flash a jay bird!" said the girl.

Jesse James had heard all sorts of slang, but he had no idea what a jay bird was.

Pretty soon he saw a faint glow, and then in a large iron spoon he saw a piece of twisted cotton cloth half buried in lard. The end protruding from the fat was lighted. This was what she meant by flashing a jay bird.

The light soon burned up brightly and Jesse James took in the surroundings.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ESCAPE.

The interior of the house was by no means inspiring to the bandit king.

There were but two persons in the house besides himself that were at all visible in the room where he had at first entered.

One of these was the girl whom we have described, and the other an old man, evidently eighty or ninety years of age.

He sat in a chair at one corner of the fireplace, hunched over, and had it not been for the continual moving of his jaws as he munched away on his tobacco, one might have mistaken him for a statue.

By this time the rain was pouring in torrents, and the thunder was roaring in the heavens above them.

There were a few chairs and benches, and one or two rude tables, but no bed, save a sort of a pallet in one corner.

With a desire to be sociable, Jesse approached the old man and asked him how he was. The old fellow made no response, but sat chewing away at his tobacco, while Jesse went on saying:

"We are going to have a storm!"

Determined to elicit some sort of an answer from him, Jesse made a trumpet of his hands and bawled in his ear:

"Say, we are going to have a big rain."

This seemed to startle the old fellow.

He started up and looked as if he would strike the bandit.

With a grin the girl said:

"Ye'd better let granny alone, or he'll hove suthin' at yer."

Jesse now gave up talking to the old man and asked:

"Don't he like to talk?"

"Sometimes he don't. He's in the dumps now."

"Is he?"

"Yes, and I tell yer ye'd allers better let him alone when he is in the dumps."

"Are you two all that live in this house?"

"No; thar's ma, she lives here, and Bud."

"Where is your ma and Bud?"

"Ma is in t'other room drunk, and Bud hev gone ter town for more whiskey."

"What is your name?"

"Madge."

"Well, Madge, what chance is there for me to get something to eat?"

"Why, I kin cook."

"Will you get my supper?"

"Yes. Wot time is it? Ain't yer got a watch?"

Jesse took out his watch and then remembered that it was not running, for they had taken the mainspring to cut off the handcuffs which Carl Greene had put on him.

"My watch is broken."

"Air et?"

"La' sakes, but that must be a gold watch."

"It is," he answered.

"Sure et is. Cost a pile o' money, didn't et?"

"Yes."

"Got another?"

"No."

"Wish yer had, I'd ax yer ter giv' me this'n."

"It would do you no good as it is not running."

"But et air so purty."

Jesse James noticed while the girl was handling the watch and gazing on it with admiration, the old man seemed to be renewed with life. He actually raised his head and gazed at them.

Jesse thought that he saw a peculiar greedy twinkle in his eye as he caught a glimpse of the brilliant, shining watch.

"Now get me a good supper and I will give you a bright silver dollar," said Jesse.

"I'll do it," she said.

She hastened to build up a fire, while the rain roared without and the lightning flashed vivid streaks of flame.

When she had the fire blazing she put on some pots and skillets, with an old Dutch oven. Turning her ugly face to Jesse she declared:

"I'll hev yer ther best supper yer ever et."

She hurried about preparing the meal, and in a short time had a very fair backwoods supper.

During the time he heard muttered grumbling and threats in the adjoining room, and after a while there issued from it a woman about forty-five years of age.

She was a tough specimen of humanity. She was tall, raw-boned, with a face like a fiend; her lips were thick and her cheekbones high and broad.

Her forehead was so low that her hair almost joined her eyebrows; her face was flushed with drink, and she had the stupid, disagreeable appearance of having been sleeping off a spree.

"Wot yer doin' here?" she demanded, as she entered the room.

"Ma, this air a stranger come," said Madge.

She gave Jesse a fierce look and asked:

"Who be yer?"

"I am Howard Jackson."

"Wall, I don't think very much o' strangers. Madge, air than any whiskey left?"

"Yes, 'nless granny took it all."

"Ef he have, blast him, I'll bust his old crust!"

At this the old man exchanged a fiery glance with the woman, but he said nothing.

Jesse had not heard the old man utter an intelligible word since he had been in the house.

Madge brought out a jug and a tin cup, which she gave to the woman.

The woman poured out the cup almost half full and sat sipping it with the utmost satisfaction. Jesse thought that he had never seen a creature more disgusting.

The storm was still raging with fearful violence without, and when he had partaken of the supper which Madge had provided, he went with her upstairs, she carrying the jay bird to light him to bed.

It was a miserable stairway and a miserable room which he reached when he had mounted it.

She pointed to a miserable bed in one corner of the room, and said:

"Ye kin lie down thar and go ter sleep. Ye'll sleep nice, too, I know."

"Is that woman below your mother?" Jesse asked.

"Yes."

"Does she often get drunk?"

With a low chuckle Madge answered:

"Wall, pilgrim, she air seldom sober."

"How long has she been addicted to drinking?"

"Why, almost ever since I kin remember, and long afore."

"Where is your father?"

"He war hung long time ago."

"Hung!"

"Yes, dad he hed a hankerin' arter good horses, and one day ther vigilance committee tuk it inter their heads ter elevate him a bit, an' they swung him up."

"Madge, your progenitors have not been very promising people."

"Dun know wot ye mean, pilgrim."

"I mean that your parentage has been bad."

"Yer mean that dad an' maw air no good?"

"Yes."

"Wall, I reckin yer air right, but by Jemany, I don't keer a single continental."

"You don't?"

"No. I hev a good time. Mam's drunk all ther time, an' I jes go off an' leave her an' do jist ez I please."

Jesse now dismissed the hard case he had before him, and told her to go downstairs.

She left him, taking the bad-smelling, smoking jay bird lamp with her, and leaving Jesse James in total darkness.

The bed was one of the poorest kind, and had not Jesse James been very tired it is doubtful if he would have trusted himself to lie upon it at all.

But he was well nigh exhausted, and at last lay down.

He had almost sunk into slumber two or three times when the voice of the old woman railing at her daughter aroused him.

But at last even this interruption was insufficient to awake him.

He slept soundly. He knew not how long he had been asleep when he was awakened suddenly. He was startled by the sudden awakening, and found himself sitting up in bed almost before he knew it.

"What is it?" he asked himself.

He listened. All was silence and he sought slumber again, but he could not sleep. At last he heard a sound below. It was many voices talking.

"I guess, boys, et air a poaty rich hanl!" Bud deelared. "Now wot der yer say ter goin' up thar an' knockin' him on the head and hevin' ther hull thing over with?"

"Them's my ideas, exactly," put in one of the rithians.

"But let's see ef he air asleep fust," suggested a more cautious and less scrupulous man.

"Good idee. Madge, go np agin."

Jesse James had pitied Madge at first, but now when he realized

that she was a part of the gang of murderers who designed to kill him in his sleep for his money and watch he despised her.

His first thought was to shoot the girl as she came upstairs, but on a second thought he changed his plan.

He would save his bullets for the men. He took his position just at the door by the top of the landing and waited for the girl.

"Now go right on up ter ther bed, an' make sure this time, gal," said Bud. "Ef yer make any mistake, cuss yer, I'll beat yer black an' blue!"

"Ef yer hed this ter do and knowed yer might git shot ur stuck when yer git ter ther top ye wouldn't be in er hurry."

"Go on, ur I'll lay ther rawhide on yer shoulders!"

Again Jesse almost pitied the girl.

He determined to make her punishment lighter than he had at first intended.

He waited until she was fairly at the top and then seized her about the waist.

The girl gave utterance to a wild shriek.

"Silence, or it will fare badly with you," Jesse said.

But her shriek had been heard below and raised the wildest consternation.

"Boys, et air all up now," cried Bud; "ther cove air erwake, and ther quicker we kit git up thar and knock him on ther head ther better. Come, let us go right up them thar steps and down him. He air only one and we air six, not countin' ther women an' granny."

"Count me, count me," screamed the old man, dancing about in the room below, his long white hair waving in the breeze.

"An' me, too!" yelled the old woman. "Harmony Kate ain't one ter be backed out in a fight."

"A pretty scrape I'm in," Jesse said.

Madge was all the while fighting and squealing like a wild cat. In vain Jesse James tried to assure her that he did not wish to hurt her. She scratched him, she bit him, and she boxed his ears in a most unmerciful manner.

At last there was evidence of a stir below. Jesse James had all the time been undecided as to the course he should pursue. He knew that though he was outnumbered the wretches were nearly all cowards, and that he could fight them from his position to an advantage.

With a wild yell and a rush they made for the narrow, rickety stairway, and soon had it a mass of crowded, jammed humanity.

"Go on—press on up, an' gin him fury!" yelled the resolute Bud, who had taken care to keep himself at the bottom of the stairs.

Jesse waited, holding the screaming, fighting, scratching girl by the waist until the mass of humanity had pressed on almost to the top of the landing.

Then he lifted Madge from the floor as if she had been a feather, and hurled her right onto the heads of the assailants with such force that they tumbled back upon each other in the direst confusion.

Wild yells rose on the scene.

Harmony Kate, as the old woman was known, was loudest and most vociferous in her demands for vengeance.

"Kill him—go up and kill him!" she shrieked.

"Grab yer guns and gin et to him!" cried Bud.

In one corner of the room were half a dozen large bore rifles. The ruffians each seized his gun, and began blazing away up the stairs.

Their bullets whizzed close to Jesse's head, and one of them cut a hole in the sleeve of his coat, but he held his ground, and continued to return the fire.

One of his bullets wounded one of the ruffians on the leg, and another knocked the jay bird from the old woman's hand.

This caused a terrible commotion among them. They ran pell-mell from the house into the yard.

The old man, who had climbed upon the wall and taken down an old-fashioned flintlock musket, fired it at Jesse before he retreated.

In a shed apartment the ruffians found some pine knots which they lighted.

The pine knots lit up the scene as brilliantly as the noonday sun. He saw them standing all huddled together holding a consultation.

"Let's burn ther house!" yelled one.

"No, no, ye'll lose ther money!" the old man declared.

"Let's starve him out!"

Bud decided that he would lead the crowd in an assault in two directions at once.

"Let's knock ther house down erbout his ears."

"That's jist what we'll do."

"Them's my sentiments," screamed Harmony Kate.

Jesse James now leveled his pistol at the crowd of wretches, determined to have revenge on them.

He took aim at the bunch and pulled the trigger.

Crack!

Sharp and keen the report rang out on the night air. One of the ruffians leaped into the air and began rubbing his hip and yelling bloody murder.

The others scampered away.

"Now or never is my time," Jesse James thought.

To escape by the front way was impossible, so he determined to try to get away by the rear.

He went to the open window and began to climb out of it. It was his only show of escape.

There were notches in the logs by which he could climb down the wall, as they furnished him excellent foothold.

When he was half way down he stuck his toes in a crack and flashed his dark lantern over the roaring waters below.

His joy can be better imagined than described by seeing a skiff resting on the surface of the water, rocking in the current. It was at the far end of the house, and he managed to glide along the wall, holding on to the cracks between the logs until he got right over it, and then dropped down into the boat.

It was tied to the house with a rope. There were oars in the boat, and cutting the string he glided swiftly down the rapid current, escaping the outlaws, but sweeping on into darkness and dangers unknown.

CHAPTER X.

DOWN THE CURRENT.

It was so dark that Jesse James could not see his hands before him. He heard all about him the wild dashing of the roaring river. He drew his lantern from his inside coat pocket and flashed it about the scene.

Jesse saw a wild and terrible scene. On every side was the roaring torrent.

The stream was not wide, but the rocky shores were a mass of foam from the surging of the flood.

He determined, however, to land as soon as he dared.

Making his lantern fast in the bow of the boat, he went back to the stern of the boat, and seizing the oar, began steering for the shore.

Not more than a mile before him he heard a wild roaring rising high above the wild tempest and its deafening thunders. He knew that that steady roar could be but one thing. It was a cataract waterfall.

How was he to descend it? The rapid current was swiftly bearing him on to certain destruction. This rival Niagara was growing louder and louder, and Jesse James knew that whatever he did must be done quickly.

He plunged his oar deep into the water, and with all his strength forced the boat into shore.

Jesse had determined to land on the same side that his horse was, for he would about as soon have been captured himself as to let Siroc fall into the hands of the ruffians.

At last while he was struggling with might and main to get into shore, he discovered a narrow passage between two great stones, and determined to run his boat between them.

He guided his boat for the spot, and seizing both oars pulled with all his might.

The current was so very swift, and for a few moments the struggle was terrible.

He pulled at his oars with more than human effort. The stout ash oars bent and at one time threatened to snap in twain.

It was the last despairing effort of a desperate man and he won.

On reaching the shore Jesse sprang out. He was too much exhausted to pull in the skiff which had saved him, but allowed it to go whirling over the roaring flood. The rifle which he had brought away with him he had left in the skiff, and let it go over the cascade.

Jesse climbed upon the bank and lay down.

After a while he rose from the ground.

"My revolvers are all right, and as for the gun, I don't care much if it is lost," he said.

He tried his lantern, but it became extinguished in some way, and all his efforts to relight it were in vain, as his matches had become wet by the rain.

Slowly and carefully he groped his way up the muddy bank, and after many a fall reached the top.

It was so dark, and travel was so difficult, that he was compelled to occasionally feel his way with his hands.

At last a vivid flash of lightning showed him a thick cluster of small hickory trees growing near, and he made his way to them.

With a knife he cut one of the hickories and made him a stout staff, which was of great service in feeling his way along the dark and muddy woods.

At last he came to a road.

The road bore evidence of having been recently traveled, although it was now covered with water.

"I wonder where the road leads to?" he asked himself. "I be-

lieve that it goes right back to the house I left. If it does then it is the very road I want to travel."

He followed the road for some distance, and then there loomed before him a light.

"I was correct," Jesse thought. "This road leads back to the very house I left."

He crept up to within a few paces of the house.

Men with torches were looking all around it, evidently searching for the man who had escaped.

They were carrying torches in their hands.

He was even near enough to them to hear them talking with each other.

"He hev got away, Will. I know he hev."

"Bet he air drowned."

At this moment the man, whom he recognized as Bud, said:

"Thar warn't but one way he could a got away."

"What ar that, Bud."

"By ther back winder."

"Wall, ef he did he fell kerplunk inter the river and war drowned."

"Yes."

"Wall, I pity pore Dutch who got killed in ther fracas."

"So do I."

Suddenly a bright idea seemed to strike Bud, and he said:

"Boys, let's look inter this matter. Ef he escaped, thar ain't but one way he could a-done et."

"How?"

"Thar is a skiff at ther back o' ther house, an' ef that air skiff iz gone, he air, too."

"Well, blame et, let's go an' look after ther skiff."

Two or three men who had pine knots went around the angle of the house, where there was a projecting platform at the side at which the skiff had been tied.

A single glance and the men uttered a yell of rage and disappointment.

The skiff was gone.

"What! air et gone?" cried Bud, coming near to them. "Yes, by the jumpin' Moses, that air skiff can't be found."

"Wall, Bud," put in Will, "even ef he did go off in ther skiff, maybe he was tumbled over ther waterfall and drowned."

"Don't be too sure on't," put in the doubtful Bud.

"Why, Bud, et is as much az a man's life's wo'th ter ventur on that air water in broad daylight, who knows ther river like a book, doggone me ef I'd like ter do it at all."

"Nur would I."

"But et beats standin' up an' lettin' half a dozen fellers kill yer all ter pieces."

Jesse had heard enough of their bad English, and determined to find Siroc, if possible. It would not be an easy job to make his way to the stable in which he had left Siroc had he had the full light of the sun. The path was hidden so that one could scarce find it. What made it worse to find there were half a dozen other paths, leading in different directions, and he was liable to be led away from the stable instead of to it.

Jesse James was in great trouble as he prowled about. Should he be discovered before he had found Siroc, he felt sure that the ruffians would have him at a disadvantage.

They had their long rifles and pistols, which were deadly weapons, while he had only his revolvers.

He resolved to not leave until he did find Siroc. Yet if he tarried about until daylight, he would be at a great disadvantage.

Jesse realized that whatever he did must be done quickly.

He had just found a path which he felt quite sure was the path leading to the barn where Siroc was.

It was so intensely dark that he could not see his hand before him, but Siroc, scenting his master, kept up a whinnying which guided Jesse to him.

Reaching his horse, he quickly untied him, and put the saddle on his back.

Then he led him from the barn and mounted.

The next important question for Jesse James was which course should he go.

"Well, Siroc, all we can do is to go away from that house. It is danger and death there, with a fighting chance for us in other places."

He started Siroc and let him take his own course. As we have observed, the trees were very thick here, and almost every variety of thorn bush was growing in the path and on each side of it.

Jesse lay down on his horse and let him go through the woods and thorns. They raked him on every side and almost tore his clothes off his back, but he kept the horse going.

For a long time it seemed as if he could hardly get through the dense wood, but anon he came to an opening or rather clearing, and then Jesse sat up in the saddle. Siroc actually started at a canter.

How long and how far he had traveled he did not know, but they were still in the wood and still buried in the most intense darkness

when all of a sudden horse and rider tumbled off a steep bank down, down into the dark, raging current of a river.

For a moment both horse and rider were stunned by the fall in the water.

Jesse regained his presence of mind almost in a moment, and spoke to his horse:

"Siroc!"

The gallant steed whinnied, and he said:

"Keep up, brave fellow, don't despair, and we will come out of this all right."

Siroc was struggling desperately for the shore.

At this moment there came a prolonged friendly blaze of lightning, which revealed the entire shore to the man on the struggling beast. He discovered that a short distance down the bank it was quite sloping. He made for that portion of the bank, and Siroc being strong and much refreshed by his rest and feed, made it to the sloping bank and ascended it without any trouble.

"Now I shall wait until morning before I travel another inch," Jesse James declared.

Consequently, he rode upon the bank under some trees and allowed his horse to graze on the short grass which grew there, while he sat dozing upon his back.

Day dawned at last. It had been a long night to the bandit king, who had lived a dozen lifetimes in the last twelve hours.

The whole night had been a succession of wildest adventures. He was delighted to mark the first faint streaks of rosy morn. It meant that he would now find his way out of this miserable forest which had been to him worse than a prison.

As soon as day dawned he started Siroc at a brisk canter along a narrow path which he saw leading off in a southerly course.

He followed this path for about ten or twelve miles, and at last came to a prairie.

It was not a very large prairie, nothing like some of those vast plains of grass which he had been accustomed to roam over in the central part of the State, but it was the first prairie he had seen since he had ventured into St. Francois County.

He hailed it with delight, and, Siroc equally well pleased to escape from the oppressive confines of thickets and forests, gave vent to neighs of pleasure as he galloped along over the prairie.

When they had reached the other side they came to a halt and Jesse James dismounted and allowed his horse to feed on the fresh, tender grass while he laid down to rest.

The skies cleared and the warm sun came down upon the tired bandit, drying his soaked garments. In the course of an hour he was thoroughly dried, but he had slept none the night before, save the short nap before he was awakened by the girl Madge coming to his room to see if he were asleep, and found it so pleasant lying there that he actually fell asleep.

He had slept for fully three hours when he was suddenly awakened by a low whinnying and something tugging at his coat. He started up in a moment to find that Siroc was standing over him and using every means in his power to awaken his master.

"Eh, Siroc, what is it?"

Jesse leaped to his feet and cast a glance about him.

A group of horsemen were galloping across the prairie, coming toward him.

He needed to cast but one glance at them to realize his danger. Though they were fully a fourth of a mile away, he recognized the man in the lead of them as none other than Carl Greene, the famous detective.

Jesse leaped into his saddle, and drawing a pistol, flourished it in the air in defiance.

The wind was blowing a gentle breeze toward him from the direction the foe was coming, and he could hear what they said.

"That is Jesse James," cried Carl Greene. "Don't let him get away. Kill him."

This last command was given as Jesse vaulted in the saddle and bid fair to escape from them altogether.

A perfect shower of bullets rained around the fugitive as he went thundering over the prairie.

He raised his hand to his pursuers as they came galloping on after him and cried:

"Come on, my lads! I'll lead you a merry chase!"

"Jesse James!" cried Carl Greene, who was now growing desperate at the probable escape of his intended victim, "if you don't halt and surrender, I will follow you up to the end and kill you!"

"Come on!" cried Jesse, defiantly.

"You had better halt. It will be hard for you if I get you!"

"I don't doubt your word, Carl Greene, and I don't intend to allow you to get hold of me!"

"Fire again!" roared Carl Greene, losing his temper.

Crack! crack! Bang! bang!

Jesse James only laughed at the futile efforts to hit him. Siroc was speeding over the ground like the wind, and Jesse turned in his saddle, and waving his hat, cried:

"Come on, my boys! I am Jesse James, catch me if you can!"

Two hours later he was riding at a leisurely gallop along a road which led across the hills. He had been riding hard since he had first been discovered, but now that he had shaken off the enemy, he slackened his speed.

Suddenly Siroc did a most unusual, and at first what was to Jesse a most unaccountable, thing.

He tossed his head in the air and gave vent to a loud neigh.

"Siroc, old boy, what in the world do you mean?"

Jesse glanced to the right and left, and saw nothing, but a moment later there came from beyond a clump of bushes an answering neigh.

"Jim Malone!" cried Jesse James.

Siroc tossed his head in the air, and repeating his signal, galloped forward to where the sound was.

But Jesse was not to be taken by surprise. It was hardly possible that Siroc would be mistaken as to his mate, though Jesse might himself. But then some other person than one of the James Boys might be riding Jim Malone.

Jesse drew a pistol and cocked it.

In a few moments he came upon two horsemen, whom he recognized as Jim Cummins and his own brother, Frank James.

With a shout of joy he rushed to their side and cried:

"Welcome, welcome; thrice welcome, both of you!"

"Oh, Jess, I am so glad we have found you!" said Frank.

"By jingo, we had just about given you up!" put in Jim Cummins.

"Where have you been?" Frank asked.

"Almost everywhere."

"Jesse, we had almost given you up," said Jim Cummins. "After I saw you on that night unhorsed by Carl Greene, I supposed that it would be all day with you, and what puzzles me most now is to know how you got away from him."

"That is not an easy matter to understand until you learn that I had a friend."

"Who?"

"Madaline McIlvane."

"Would she befriend you after——"

"She did," interrupted Jesse. "Once win a woman's love and you always have it."

Jim Cummins shook his head and said:

"Women are curious creatures. As for me, I don't want anything to do with them."

"Well, what have you been doing?" Jesse asked.

"We stayed at the hut a day after Jim returned and said you were captured," Frank answered. "Then we thought that we would start out and see if we could do you any service. We were unable to learn anything of you, but we fell in with Sam Hilderbrand, and he took us to his cave."

"Did you tell him of the James Boys' hut?"

"No."

"I guess that he don't know anything about it."

"I think not, yet there are few secrets in these mysterious woods that he does not know. He told that there were some which he would not impart to his own brother if he were alive."

"Very well, let him keep his secrets and we keep ours."

He had scarce made the remark when Jim said:

"Hark! I hear horses coming!"

"It's our pursuers!"

"Jesse, let's ambush them!" said Jim.

Jesse did not exactly approve of that plan, for he knew that there were too many of them for the James Boys to successfully defeat them. True, they could repulse the advance, as they were no doubt coming strung along the road for two or three miles. He was over-persuaded, however, and at last consented to meet them with an ambuscade.

"It won't do them much good," he said.

"But it will do me some good to kill a few of them."

"Carl Greene will rally the remainder, and they will come on after us."

"But we shall have fewer to hunt us than we did have."

"Very well. If you boys are hungering and thirsting for a fight, I will see that you have it."

In a few moments they had selected a convenient grove of trees and bushes growing at the roadside, and laid their plan for an ambuscade.

They had not long to wait, for in a few moments six horsemen came galloping along the road, with Carl Greene at their head. Jesse James and his companions recognized Greene at once.

"Ready, aim, fire!"

The last command was given in a sharp, loud tone.

Crack! crack!

Jesse's pistol failed to fire. The dull, empty snap told the bandit captain that he had failed to reload his revolver after his recent encounter with the enemy.

Thus Carl Greene's life was saved. The man on the right, as

well as the man on the left of him went down and lay wallowing in their blood on the ground, but Carl escaped unhurt.

"Fire!" shouted Carl Greene.

The pursuers poured in a scattering volley into the bushes and fled.

Carl Greene pursued them and tried his best to rally them. But he had to chase them a mile before he could do so. Finally he got them halted and brought them about and led them once more to the attack. But they came up warily this time. The James Boys could be seen in full flight a mile away.

"There are three of them now," said Carl Greene.

"Yes," answered the sheriff, Pete Hunslow, "and I do reckon that three greater devils never went unhung."

For hours they rode at a canter or a gallop, and a part of the time even at a walk, and their pursuers came after them, seeming not desirous of pressing too close.

At last there loomed up before them a small town. As they came in sight of the town the James Boys saw two of their pursuers riding around them on their right to get into the town before they did.

"Look, do you see them?" cried Jesse.

"Yes, they intend to beat us into town."

"No doubt of it. It is their intention to rouse the people and head us off."

"They shan't do it!" cried the bandit king. "Forward!"

Then they charged forward on the town. The race was exciting. The people of the quiet little village were roused from their listless repose by shouts and yells and the crack of pistols, and they saw three men coming thundering down on their village from one direction and two from another.

They all did the wisest thing that they could do, and that was to seek flight.

The James Boys had mistaken the motive of their pursuers, as they only intended to reach the village and secure a relay of fresh horses.

But now that they were in the chase they were determined to win. All of them reached the village about the same time, and the streets became a battlefield. It was a bloodless battle to be sure, but it was nevertheless an exciting one. Glass was knocked out of the windows, a bullet cut off a corner of the sign on the saloon, and half a dozen bullets pierced the houses. Two horses that were hitched to a wagon took fright and ran away down the street, adding to the noise and tumult.

In the midst of the uproar and excitement the James Boys went thundering through the town, yelling as loudly as they could, and firing their pistols right and left.

There was an utter disregard for the result of their shooting, which intimidated all save Carl Greene and a few of his followers.

Carl Greene only paused long enough to change horses and pressed on after them.

The James Boys passed on for about two miles. The day was almost spent. A farmhouse at the roadside attracted their attention, and they rode to it, demanded oats for their horses and some food for themselves. They stood by their horses eating bread and butter while the horses ate their oats.

When they had finished, Jesse told a boy to bring three buckets half full of water. The boy did so, and Jesse took a brandy flask from his pocket and poured a pint of brandy into the three buckets.

First with a sponge they wet the mouths of the animals, and then they allowed them to drink each half a bucket of water strongly mixed with brandy.

"Now, lads, let's mount and be going," said Jesse James.

As they vaulted in their saddles there came upon the air wild shouts and their pursuers burst in view.

"Oho, they are coming!" cried Jesse. "Well, we will lead them a merry chase."

"Jesse, they have fresh horses."

"So they have. Well, that means a long chase."

CHAPTER XI.

MORE MYSTERY OF THE HUT.

Night came on. It was a clear, bright night, the moon shone with marvelous clearness upon the scene. Bright as a crystal in the heavens it beamed upon the earth, and the very air seemed filled with light.

The ring of iron-shod hoofs rang out merrily along the ridge as the James Boys flew over the ground.

There was a look of uneasiness on Jesse's face.

He had no fears for himself. Though Carl Greene and his posse changed horses twenty times before the night was done they could not run down Siroc. He had no fears for Frank, for there never

had existed a dozen horses in the world that could run down Jim Malone.

But he did have some serious apprehensions for Jim Cummins. Jim's horse was a thoroughbred animal, and was better than any animal that had been set to chase him, yet the horse was not a Siroc or Jim Malone. There never lived but one Siroc and but one Jim Malone.

Jim's horse, excellent as he was, would not be able to outrun a dozen horses.

Jesse saw with no little alarm that the animal was showing signs of fatigue. He had said nothing about the matter to Jim or Frank yet, but they had already noted the indications of the horse giving out.

But they held on to their course and the night wore along. The James Boys had been riding in a sort of a circuit, hoping to make their way back to the dense forests in which they had found safety.

They succeeded much better than they expected. People do often exceed their own expectations. When they have almost given up all hope of succeeding in any enterprise, it is then that they may be nearest it.

Jesse James was almost in despair when they suddenly came to a river.

A brilliant thought entered his mind.

Their pursuers were not more than a mile behind them, and there was a ferryboat on their side.

"We'll cross, boys, before they come. Awake the sleepy ferryman."

The cabin of the ferryman was but a few paces away, and Jim Cummins went to arouse him. In a few moments the ferryman and his boy came down, and the James Boys with their horses rode into the flat-bottom boat.

"Now heave ahead, my friends," said Jesse James, "and if you get us over in five minutes I will give you five dollars."

"All right; Bob, git yer oar."

In an incredibly short time they were gliding across the stream which, at this point, was wide and swift.

"Is there another ferry on this river?" asked Jesse, "and how close?"

"Yes; twenty miles."

"Is there no other ferryboat save this one in less than twenty miles of this spot?"

"Thar ain't, stranger."

Jesse's plan was now laid. They had just got landed, when, by the aid of the brilliant moon, they saw a dozen horsemen ride down to the water brink on the other side.

"Thar's more ter cross, pap," said the boy.

"Yes."

Jesse told them to draw the boat in close to shore, and when they had all gone ashore with their horses, he commanded Frank James to seize the bowline.

"Jim, get some dry pine brush—there is any amount of it. I am going to burn the boat."

"Burn my boat?"

"That's what I said."

"What on airth be ye a-goin' t' do that for?"

Jim Cummins was in the meanwhile gathering up the brush preparatory to kindling a fire on the boat.

"Light it, Jim. Those fellows on the other side are growing restless and uneasy," said Jesse. "It seems that they want to come over."

"Yes."

Jim struck a match and in a few moments a bright flame shot up from the pine sticks and brushwood. Then he pushed the boat off.

Jesse then turned to the ferryman and asked:

"Well, sir, can you get back on the other side?"

"I reckon so."

"Here is the five dollars I promised you. I always keep my promise, whether it is to reward or punish."

"But my boat!"

"There it goes down the stream."

"Yes, it's all on fire. It will burn up."

"I must confess, sir, that it has very much that kind of an appearance."

"Ain't ye goin' to pay me for the boat?"

"Did I promise to do so?"

"No, but you burnt it."

"Well, my friend, that is one of the necessities of war; we could not do better! If we had let you take that boat back we would have had those fellows over there following us, and just now we are decidedly anxious to shake them off."

"Who are ye?"

"We are the James Boys," Jesse answered without a single moment's hesitation.

"Oh, great Scott, Bob, we mought a been killed."

The great flat boat went floating down the stream, sending out a broad red glare of flame in every direction.

"Jesse," said the cautious Frank, "I think we had better be moving."

"No hurry now, no other flatboat within twenty miles."

"But they may find skiffs to get over, and there are plenty of horses on this side to mount them."

"I suspect you are right, Frank, and the best thing that we can do will be to go on," said Jesse.

They mounted their horses and rode away.

As they galloped away from the river they cast a glance back, and saw the flatboat gliding down the river, a mass of flame. The sight was grand and picturesque.

The flames leaped high into the air, lighting the river with a lurid glare.

The officers could be seen on the other shore; Carl Greene was seen running up and down the stream, and evidently greatly excited.

With a low chuckle Jesse James said:

"Outwitted again."

They rode on, and in a few seconds were out of sight of the river and the burning boat. They did not leave the boat, however, until it was almost burnt to the water's edge, and there was no possible chance of it being used again.

The James Boys then held their course, and after two hours from leaving the river came to the dense forest in which their hut was concealed.

Jesse James was the first to discover where they were.

"Boys," he cried, "we are all right."

"Why?"

"We are not a mile from it now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I am quite sure."

"Well, it will be like getting home again."

They found the forest very dense, but there was a bluff rising boldly above the tree tops, and it was toward the bold bluff that Jesse James steered his course. He continued in the direction of the bluff.

He recognized the bluff as the great stone against which the hut was built.

They pressed through the bushes and went half a mile through one of the most dense jungles a person ever saw and came upon the hut. It was quite evident that the hut had not been visited or disturbed since they had left it.

Jesse opened the door and they led their horses through into the wonderful cavern beyond.

"Shall we put out a guard?" Frank asked.

"Most certainly. First thing we need will be a little rest."

"Well, but a fellow can't rest while he is on guard."

"No; but then you know that we must sleep and guard by turns."

"Well, I am willing to take my share at standing guard first if it is thought best."

"You have a watch, Jim?"

"Yes."

"Is it running?"

"Yes; is yours?"

"No. Sam Hilderbrand took the mainspring out of it to saw off the handcuffs which Carl Greene had put on my wrists."

"Weil, I never knew that one could do that with the mainspring of a watch."

"He did it."

Frank James, meanwhile, was looking about the place, getting something to eat. Both had gone many hours without any food. Among other things brought in as the result of their foraging expeditions were two dozen tallow candles.

These were a great advantage over the old smoky pine knot which had been their only light on their former visit.

A meal was spread for them, and then the horses fed and a guard set.

For the next two or three days nothing worth relating happened at the home of the James Boys.

They passed their time recruiting wasted energies, sleeping and eating, and getting ready for a grand expedition.

That expedition was planned while lying in the hut, as they called their hiding place.

The James Boys had planned many wild, desperate and successful expeditions, but this was on the largest scale of any they had ever planned. It was nothing less than the capture of Firman McIlvane, and forcing him to tell where his secret mine was.

The mine would be everything to them. It was wealth that would buy their pardon. No governor of any State could resist the temptation which they had or would have to offer. Jesse James had had considerable experience with mines while in California and Colorado. It was the purest silver ore ever known.

Had they succeeded in getting at the secret, their plans would no doubt have carried out as they expected.

They had been back a week from their last expedition, when Jim Cummins, who was of an inquisitive turn of mind, suggested that they investigate the cavern.

"I tell ye, boys, we hain't never explored it yet, now let's do so."

"I am willing," said Jesse.

"Well, shall we all go?"

"Yes."

"And leave no guard out here?"

"I don't think it's worth while," said Jesse. "If any one should stagger on to this hut—and there is not one chance in ten thousand that they will do so—they would in all probability decide that it was only a deserted cabin and go away. We will remove all evidence of any one being here."

They removed every evidence of any one having been there and then closed the door. The door was made of good, substantial oak, and though it was not painted, it would resist a stout blow. It was very little decayed in all the years it had stood there, for the trees and the bluff had in part screened it from the damp.

The James Boys carried everything within the cavern part and left the hut as it was when they came there.

Then they closed the aperture and went down the long corridor or grotto and came to the place where their horses were feeding on the hay and oats which the bandits had provided for them in one of their foraging expeditions. The horses whinnied at sight of their masters, and they were evidently glad to see them, for they had grown impatient to be out upon the road.

The James Boys had most wonderful horses. The animals, like their riders, seemed never to tire. If they did become a little exhausted from hard riding, they always recruited in a day or two and were ready for another long chase or flight, as the occasion might be.

The James Boys had decided to make their cavern the prison for Mr. McIlvane when they should have captured him, and before setting out on that important expedition it became necessary to thoroughly explore the cavern and see if it would afford him any chance to escape from it.

They went down the long cavern and came to where the skeleton horse stood. Here they waited a long time gazing at the frame of the horse and wondering who had placed it there and how any one had come to place it in such a position.

"I say, boys, I don't like this place," said Frank James, shivering with a superstitious dread.

"Why?" Jim asked, with a smile playing over his face.

"There is too much of the dead here to suit me."

Jesse laughed and said:

"Come on."

They passed the place where the muskets were stacked, and a little farther on saw the skeleton sentry, sitting as he had been probably for a dozen years with his musket at his side.

There was nothing about the sentry by which he could possibly be identified.

Jesse examined the cartridge box, but there was nothing by which he could possibly tell who he had been while in this life.

"Well, let us go on," said Jesse, after having exhausted every possible resource to fathom the mystery, and being unable to do so.

They went into one of the branch grottos and finally came to a vast subterranean chamber which they had never been in before.

They went from this vast chamber to another grotto.

As they were making their way along, they suddenly discovered looming up before them a vast square door which seemed to have been cut by the hand of man.

"Stop!" Frank James cried in abject terror.

"What do you see to frighten you?"

"Look on that writing above the door!"

Jesse and Jim looked as directed and what they saw was enough to appall the strongest heart. In flaming, blood-red letters over the door was the following:

"This is the Chamber of Death! All Who Enter Here Die. Don't Venture In if You Wish to Ever Return."

CHAPTER XII.

SAM HILDERBRAND'S SECRET.

Long the astounded James Boys gazed in amazement and wonder on the mysterious warning before them.

"Jess, what are you going to do?"

"I'd give ten dollars to see what is in that apartment."

"You can see it for nothing."

"Are you going, Jesse?"

"I certainly am."

"When?"

"Just as soon as we have had our dinners, for we will want full stomachs, for this is liable to prove a long jaunt."

Frank prepared their meal for them, and they set out for their journey for the cavern of death.

In due time they reached it and pausing read again the warning over the door.

"Well, what do you think of those letters, boys?" Jesse asked.

"They look as if they might be written in blood!" Frank James gasped with a shudder.

"Well, to me they seem rather fresh."

"They have been painted with red paint," said Jesse James.

"Yes, just the kind of red paint which they use in painting wagons red."

"Well, that is about the kind of my opinion. It is a very brilliant color, anyway. Come on, if you want to go with me."

Jesse started toward the fatal portal and Jim and Frank followed him.

There is no need denying it, Jim Cummins felt a weak, trembling sensation as he went through the portal, and Frank shook as if he had an ague fit.

Once through the portal they came to a long sort of a corridor, and in this they finally saw a door which barred all further progress.

By the aid of their torches they saw over the door, painted in great flaming letters of red, the word:

"STOP!"

"What does that mean?" Jesse asked. Then his keen eyes made out on the right of the order to stop, the words:

"Look on your right!"

They did so, and beheld some painting on the rocks on their side.

Hewn out of the stone was a sort of altar, and lying on the altar was an open Bible. The words above the Bible were:

"Read this book well before you advance, as you are about to enter the mysterious world beyond."

Jesse James went to the Bible and examined it. There was no page to indicate who the publisher was, or how long since the book had been published.

On the fly leaf of the Bible were written these words:

"Foolish man, this day thou shalt die!"

Jesse was puzzled. He knew now that some one had prepared all these guards for some sort of a secret, but when had this precaution been taken?

For aught he knew, that Bible might have been there for twenty years.

Yet the Bible and painting neither one had any indication of age.

They discussed that matter for a few moments, and Jesse was of the opinion that, while they neither had any appearance of age, it was because they were in the cavern and could not come in contact with the air.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Jim Cummins asked.

"I never started to do anything yet that I did not go through with it," Jesse James said.

"And in face of all warning, you are going on?"

"Yes."

"Well, wherever you go I will follow."

"Do you see that door?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am going through it."

"Then Frank and I will be close behind."

"Jesse, look out for some infernal pitfall or trap," suggested Jim Cummins.

"I have my eyes open."

"Whoever constructed this might have placed a torpedo or a mine here to be sprung by the one who should attempt to penetrate the secret."

"I have thought of all that."

Jesse proceeded with the utmost caution.

At last the door was reached.

On one side of it were the following words:

"Now, bid farewell to earth, for whoever opens that door dies!"

Jesse James touched the door lightly at first and said:

"It seems to be on a spring."

"Have a care, Jesse. There is no need to be foolhardy."

"I am looking out for myself."

He stood well back at one side and gave the door a violent push, or rather kick with his foot.

It sprang part of the way open and then started to close again.

But at this moment there was a rattling crash of firearms from within. A volley was fired and Jesse started back with a groan, and staggering against the wall seemed about to sink, as if shot through the heart.

"Betrayed!" cried both Jim and Frank, and with their pistols cocked they leaped at the door.

As soon as Frank James found it was a natural instead of a supernatural foe they had to deal with he was as brave as any one.

Like a pair of enraged lions the outlaws leaped into the strange apartment from which the volley of musketry had been fired.

They found no living person present.

The smoke from the musketry cleared away and they saw before them an array of gun barrels resting on a sort of platform, and behind each gun was a grinning skeleton.

Again Frank James was seized with a momentary dread, and in

his abject terror was almost on the point of flying, but at this moment Jesse James, who had only been stunned by the report of so many guns and one ball grazing his temple, entered.

He took in the situation at a glance, and said:

"Don't be afraid, boys. It's only an infernal machine; can't you see that? I'll warrant that every gun has been fired and that all danger is over."

"Are you badly wounded, Jesse?" Jim Cummins asked.

"No. Only a few scratches. Some of the splinters from the door, which, as you see, is completely shattered with bullets, struck me in the face and made it bleed a little."

The door had been shot all to pieces, and was blown almost from its hinges by the force of the tremendous shot.

They found a curtain hanging at another apartment, and on pulling it aside beheld a scene that made the stoutest quail for a moment. Here was a room about forty feet square, as square as if a master mechanic had cut it out. The walls were high and cut smooth, and white as marble.

In the ceiling, which was fully forty feet high, was a large brass hook which supported a great silver chandelier. Below the chandelier on the rug-covered floor was a table, about which sat four grinning skeletons in the uniforms of soldiers or, rather, officers in the United States army, as each one had shoulder straps.

Each held in his hand a glass half filled with wine, and in the center of the table was a decanter with well-filled bottles.

The skeletons were so arranged that as they entered their bony faces and eyeless sockets were turned directly toward them. The sight was horrifying, and sent a shudder even through the frame of Jesse James. There was a large placard on the table, on which were painted the words:

"Sit and drink with us."

"Oh, let us leave this horrible place," groaned Frank James.

"No, let us see the end of it," Jesse said.

"Jesse," said Jim, "it's a little curious that there are just three vacant chairs there, as if they had been prepared for us."

"It is."

"We have accepted every challenge, shall we accept this?"

"No, that wine is no doubt poisoned."

At this moment there came the first sound they had heard. A voice in fearful, muffled thunder said:

"No, it's not."

For a moment the James Boys were silent.

Jesse was perplexed, but a part of the problem had to him been solved. The mystery was a mystery of the present and not of the past. That infernal machine and these hobgoblin arrangements might have been built in the past, but they were controlled and manipulated by some one living in the present.

After a few moments he said:

"Can you hear me when I speak?"

There was a moment's silence, and then a deep, solemn and impressive:

"Yes."

"I am glad of it, for I want to talk with you."

"What do you want to say?"

"I want to request you that you come out and show yourself and not be masquerading while you talk through an invisible tube."

"Mortal man, I am invisible!"

"Do you not know that it is impossible for mortal eyes to see immortality? I am a spirit, floating about in the air about you, while my fleshless skeleton sits before you at that fatal table."

"Then you are a ghost?" said Jesse, lightly.

"Yes, and I have come to warn you not to penetrate the secrets of this abode of the dead. Your eyes have seen and your ears have heard; be content and now depart ere it is everlasting too late."

"I thank you very much for your advice!"

"You are welcome, my friend, and I hope that you will obey at once, and let what your eyes have this day beheld in the cave of death never pass your lips, for it is not for mortal man to speak of this unhallowed spot and live."

"But I must say that I cannot take your advice, my invisible friend."

"What! will you not keep the secret?"

"No, nor will I leave the cave until I have met you face to face."

"Then die!"

There was a great roaring like the blast of a mighty trumpet which seemed to shake the cavern to its very center. Frank James begged his brother to come away, and Jim Cummins joined him in his pleading, but Jesse James remained as firm as a rock and absolutely refused to move.

After a few moments the horrible roaring ceased and all was quiet.

"What was that?" Frank asked.

Jesse James, as cool as if he had been in camp talking over the most ordinary thing imaginable, said:

"It was some one blowing through a powerful trumpet in some

part of the cavern. I don't know where they were, but it was evidently connected with this."

He began a careful inspection of the walls of the cavern and at last found a very small hole. It was so small that one would not at first have seen it at all. In fact, it took the keenest sort of an eye to tell that there were an opening in the wall. The opening consisted in several minute holes which Jesse thought at first only natural apertures in the rock, or holes cut by some insect or worm. He placed his ear close to them and was sure he heard some one moving in some far-off apartment of the cavern.

He placed his ear quite close, and after listening a while heard a faint whisper. A voice in the faintest whisper seemed to say:

"I don't believe that they are going to scare worth a cent."

"No, we are not," he answered, with his mouth close to the hole. "We are the James Boys, and will keep your secret, whoever you may be and whatever your secret may be. Come out like a man and trust us, and we will not betray you. I fancy that I know who you are, and I don't think that there is any need for you to beat about the bush any more."

"Jesse James, is that you?"

"Yes. Come out here and see us."

"Wait! I will be there in five minutes."

In five minutes a side of the wall was shoved back on a sort of roller, and, to their surprise, Sam Hilderbrand entered.

The James Boys had probed Sam Hilderbrand's secret.

CHAPTER XIII.

DEATH OF M'ILVANE.

Frank and Jim Cummins were utterly amazed, but Jesse James looked as if he had anticipated something of the kind.

With a smile he extended his hand, and said:

"Sam Hilderbrand, I want to congratulate you on your shrewd invention!"

"Jesse, I didn't know it was you or I would not have endangered your life as I did."

"Well, your infernal machine came very nearly blowing my head off."

"I am very sorry for it."

"But tell me, Sam, when did you discover this wonderful cavern?"

"I discovered it in 1862," he answered.

"And did you add to it by cutting these walls straight?"

"Well, the walls were almost straight when I first found it. Some one dwelt here long before Columbus discovered America. I built the hut at the small entrance of the cavern, and being a mechanic, a stone cutter and blacksmith, all in one, I managed to fix the place up as you see, and get it in tolerable good shape."

"But the skeletons?"

"Yes, I thought you'd want to know about them. Well, each one of those grinning fellows has a history of his own, which I shall not attempt to relate now."

"Let it suffice that each skeleton represents an enemy whom I killed. If you will look at them you will find a bullet hole in the head of each. Old Killdevil brought down every one of them, save the big skeleton you see on guard at the door. Those are the bones of old Coots, and I killed him with my pistol while I was eating at his table. You see, Coots had betrayed me, and set a lot of Federal soldiers to catch me. Now his bones ornament this cavern. I have the pleasure almost every day of coming in here and looking at my former enemies, who have now become my friends."

"Sam, is there any other outlet to this cavern than the one at our hut, as we call it?"

"Yes, there are three outlets."

"Where are they?"

"Well, about two miles away from here carries one out at the top of a mountain through a sort of fissure of the rock, and where no one would certainly expect a cavern by looking at it from the outside. Another leads five miles away and comes out in the bed of a ravine. Then the third enters my cave, seven miles away, where you have been."

"Then the two caves are connected?"

"Yes."

"And you can pass from one to the other without coming to the surface of the earth at all?"

"Yes. Do you blame me for guarding the secret?"

"No."

"No one save yourselves and myself knows of it."

"Then let us keep the secret to ourselves," said Jesse James.

"It's all right, boys, now that you know it," said Hilderbrand. "I never give my plans away. I never let one of my own band know of the existence of the cavern. Like Stonewall Jackson, if

my own coat knew my plans I would burn it. My intention is to always keep in such a way that the enemy will not know what I am about."

"And I think you can do it here."

"I have done it for almost twenty years."

They now proceeded to investigate the cavern, looking into other mysterious and curious apartments, which were certainly wonderful. Hilderbrand was perfectly familiar with every part of the mysterious underground apartments, and could go from one to the other with the aid of torch or lantern.

But he had well supplied himself with lanterns. He said that the pine knots which he had at first used for torches so blackened up the walls that he had decided to get lanterns and make his way without being tracked by long lines of smoke.

He had nothing now to conceal from the James Boys, and entered into the spirit of the inspection, showing them every subterranean apartment and the hallways leading to them. He also showed many corridors which he had cut through the solid rock.

Jesse James and Hilderbrand went out into the front apartment or cabin at last, and Frank and Jim prepared dinner.

"It is glorious to get out of doors after one has been confined in that cavern so long," said Jesse.

"Yes, but those underground holes are very grateful to one when one is chased by a regiment of soldiers."

"Have you ever been chased by a whole regiment?" Jesse James asked.

"Yes, and by a whole brigade. It was in 1861. Gen. Prentiss chased me with a whole brigade of ten thousand men."

"Did you fight them?" asked Jesse, laughing.

"Fight 'em? Well, I guess I did. You see it was in the woods, and they were all infantry save the officers, and I just trotted along through the woods and loaded old Killdevil as I ran, and when I had got her loaded, I would wheel about and down one. I never failed to hit my man. They poured storms of bullets after me. Some of 'em came pretty close to my head, but I had a decided advantage. I knew the country, and I think that I left fully a score of them in the woods with their noses turned up to the sun."

Dinner was ready for them, and they sat down to it.

Sam Hilderbrand complimented the James Boys on their ability as providers of the good things of this world. He added:

"The only thing that I see lacking is some good wine."

This recalled to the mind of Jim Cummins the wine he had seen in the glasses of the skeletons, and also in the decanters, and he asked:

"Is that wine back in that room where your ghosts are drinking good?"

"One drop of it would kill a dozen men. It is good wine, but it has prussic acid in it, and is the most deadly poison."

"I supposed it was," said Jesse James.

They now began to discuss what had best be done. Jesse James never let Hilderbrand know his plans. Had he done so their plans might not have conflicted, but Jesse intended to play Hilderbrand false. His object was to get the mine and keep the secret to himself. He intended to capture Mr. McIlvane, make him reveal the secret of the mine, and then kill him, work the mine alone, or with Frank and Jim, until he had exhausted it, and let Sam Hilderbrand be entirely outside of the scheme.

Jesse and Frank took two or three days' scouting, trying to get hold of McIlvane, but found it impossible.

The summer was advancing, and the wheat and oats were ripening for the harvest. In many fields they found the harvesters already at work.

The James Boys returned one night and declared they would go out no more for a week.

"Very well, boys," said Hilderbrand: "let me and old Killdevil go out and take a look into the outer world. There are some old scores to settle, and we may add another skeleton to our collection."

Hilderbrand set out, resolved on vengeance. He had an old score to pay, as he said, with Firman McIlvane, and if that man had known that his enemy was on the warpath and watching him he surely would have got out of his way.

To carry out the daring project he had in view—that of killing Firman McIlvane—Hilderbrand went to Flat River, and after remaining several days took a pone of corn bread for his rations and walked to McIlvane's farm on Big River after night.

He passed through his enemy's fields, but finding no place where harvesting had been going on, he crossed Big River on a fishtrap dam, and ranged over the Baker farm on the opposite side of the river about a mile above the Big River Mill, where McIlvane and his family now resided.

He found where they had been harvesting, or had just commenced, in a field which formed the southwestern corner of the farm.

Hilderbrand watched all day, but in the evening as soon as the hand had done cutting, they all disappeared, going he knew not where. He next stationed himself at a short distance from the

river and watched to shoot McIlvane when he came to water his horse; but he was disappointed, for another brought the horse to water.

Disappointment did not discourage Hilderbrand, but with a perseverance worthy of a better cause he proceeded to wait. That night he slept under some overhanging rock; and on the next morning (June 23) crossed the river on the fish dam, and went to the lower part of McIlvane's farm. There he found the negroes cutting down a field of rye. They cut away for several hours, until they got it all down within one hundred yards of the fence before McIlvane made his first round. Hilderbrand allowed him to cut on until he had cut past him, then the doomed man stopped to whet his scythe. He was now within easy gunshot, and such a marksman as Hilderbrand could not miss him. He silently cocked his rifle, and resting it across a moss-grown stone aimed it at the head of his enemy. But it was Hilderbrand's desire to shoot him in the head, and he waited until he had whetted the scythe and placing it on the ground wiped the perspiration from his face, and for a moment leaned on the scythe looking straight at the spot where Hilderbrand was concealed. Now was the time.

Hilderbrand's eye glanced along the barrel, he brought the foresight, the hind sight and the white, glistening forehead to a focus, and his finger touched the trigger.

Crack! sharp and keen and a little puff of smoke rolled upward. Through the smoke he saw McIlvane sink bleeding and rigid in the throes of death.

The negroes hastened to where he was and raised the limp and lifeless form.

Hilderbrand afterward told Dr. A. Wendell Keith, of Big River Mills, Mo., that nothing but a series of wrongs long continued could have induced him to take the life of Mr. McIlvane.

Hilderbrand returned to the mysterious cavern which had for a long time been his home, but failed to enter the cavern by the cabin known as the James Boys' hut, but entered at his usual entrance seven miles away from the hut. He took a long sleep, and after refreshing himself with a hearty meal, he went to see his guests in the other end.

He found them playing cards.

"Hello, Hilderbrand!" cried Jesse James, on his entering the hut from the cavern. "How are you?"

"Only one-third all right," he answered.

"What do you mean?"

"I went out for three, and only got one."

"Do you mean you have killed another enemy?"

"Yes."

"What have you done with the skeleton?" Jim Cummins asked.

"I have not got that yet, but I will after they have planted it. They can never plant one of my friends so deep that I can't find him."

"Whom did you get this time?" Jesse James asked, carelessly.

"Firman McIlvane!"

CHAPTER XIV

CARL GREENE OUTWITTED.

"Who?"

Jesse James bounded to his feet almost breathless with rage and amazement.

"I said Firman McIlvane!" answered Hilderbrand.

For a few moments Jesse James could not speak. He stood glaring at the outlaw with eyes that seemed starting from their sockets.

Frank James and Jim Cummins, those two true and trusted friends who had spent almost their whole lives with Jesse James, had never before seen him in such a rage.

In that terrible, dangerous voice which would have made any other man than Sam Hilderbrand tremble with dread he said:

"What did you say?"

"I said I had killed Firman McIlvane. You certainly know that he is an old enemy and that I have told you long ago that I intended to kill him some time."

Jesse James' anger now flamed out in words.

"Dolt, idiot, fool!" he screamed.

Fortunately Hilderbrand was not a high-tempered man; in fact, those who knew him best said that he was good natured. He could actually joke with a man while loading his gun to kill him.

"What's the matter with ye, Jess? Have ye lost your senses?" he coolly asked.

"Why did you kill him?"

"Was he a friend of yours?"

"No, but the mine—the silver mine—"

"Well, but I didn't kill that."

"But how are we to find it now that McIlvane is dead?"

"Well, old Mac livin' would never help you to find the mine."

Don't you know that he would be the last person on earth to tell you where it was?"

"But we intended to play a trick on him."

"What kind of a trick?" Hilderbrand asked in a slow, solemn manner.

"We intended to seize him and hold him a captive until he told where the money or the silver mine was."

For a moment Hilderbrand chewed his tobacco with most provoking coolness, and then he said:

"I don't think you could do it, Jess."

"No, a numbskull, a dolt, an idiot, is incapable of thinking anything. You infamous fool, you have just ruined all our plans!"

"Now, Jess, there ain't no use in your getting mad and injurin' your lungs a-cussin' me; it's done and can't be helped. I wanted to kill McIlvane because he killed my brother Frank. If he had killed your brother Frank I guess you would want to kill him too, wouldn't you?"

"But I would have exercised some sense about it, and not go thwarting the plans of my friends," Jesse James hotly retorted.

"Well," returned Sam, slowly, as he chewed on his tobacco and his fingers fondled the barrel of his beloved rifle, "if I had plans I wanted my friends to help me in I would tell them something about 'em an' not be tryin' to sneak around and do somethin' in which I expected to make a speck an' leave my friends out altogether, as it seems you have been doin'."

"Hold on, Sam Hilderbrand!" cried Jesse James, his eyes flashing with a dangerous light. "I want you to understand that, terrible as you are, I have no fears of you!"

"I don't suppose you have. I am not tryin' to scare anybody. I'd rather not scare people. But what I say is so. You have called me some pretty hard names, Jess, but I can overlook it. I rather suspect that I have interfered with your plans, but you must know I did not understand the importance of 'em when I shot Mac or I wouldn't a-done it. Now, as far as quarrelin' with you or anybody else, I won't do it, for I am not much on the quarrel. But if you really want to fight and will fight over this I am ready to fight with anything from a tenpenny nail to a crowbar, from a slungshot to a twenty-four-pounder. But I really think that the best thing we can do about this matter is to let it go. It wouldn't help it any if you killed me and I killed you. That wouldn't get the mine back."

"Now, that is sense!" put in Frank James. "Why need we be fightin' with each other? We have got to fight almost everybody else."

"You are right, Frank!" Jim Cummins declared. "I know that Jesse James will see it all in that light, too, just as soon as he begins to look at it right."

"I have said all I have to say about it. I am not going to make any quarrel," said Jesse, and he and Hilderbrand shook hands.

But after what had happened Hilderbrand knew that he and the James Boys could not get along very well in the same cavern, so he proposed to give them the cavern in which they were, with the house known as the James Boys' hut, and return to his own cave.

"We could not object to that," Jesse said.

"Well, then we separate. Now, if ever you should be hard pressed you can always find shelter in my cave."

"And you can in ours," Frank replied.

The grim old bushwhacker shook his head, and a smile played over his face as he answered:

"Sam Hilderbrand has an abundance of hiding places. There are wonders under the ground and above it which he alone knows. Let any one find me who can. Take care of yourselves and Hilderbrand will take care of himself."

There was a passage between the cavern in front of the James Boys' hut and the cave of Sam Hilderbrand, but they were never able to find it. Many of the secrets of their cave they never learned. Hilderbrand after his quarrel with Jesse went away, and during the remainder of their stay in the neighborhood never came about them.

"Jess," said Frank, as soon as he was gone. "I am sorry you quarreled with him."

"I will yet put a bullet through him," Jesse answered, grinding his teeth in his rage. "He spoiled the only plan by which we can become rich."

"But he did not intend to do so. Remember that Hilderbrand is an outlaw for vengeance and not for plunder."

"I tell you, Frank, with that mine we could have bought our pardon; we could have lived like lords; we could have gone to Congress, or been elected governor of any State of the Union; but all is lost!"

"Perhaps not; maybe we can yet find the silver mine."

"I am going to try. I have a plan that I shall try. It is the old white mule."

"What of him?"

"He alone knows the way to the mine."

"Well, if he does, do you think he will tell you?" said Jim, with a smile. "The age of fables, when animals talked, is past, Jesse."

"No it is not; all that is necessary is to have some one who has sufficient intelligence to interpret their language."

"Very well, go ahead and tell us just how you expect to make the old mule tell you where the silver mine is."

"It's all very simple when you understand it. You see, the old mule has learned the way, and perhaps goes there from force of habit."

"Yes; well, go on."

"My first plan is to get that mule, and when I have got it to load it with mining implements, just as the old miner did, and start to the mine. I know the road for about five miles. By the time we have got that far the mule will, from force of habit, go on to the mine."

"By George, I believe he has hit the idea, Frank," declared Jim Cummins.

"Maybe it will do."

All three of them mounted their horses on the next morning, and after carefully reconnoitering left the cavern.

They rode to the vicinity of Big River and camped there for the night. Shortly after dark Jesse James stole toward the house, and soon came in sight of it. Mr. McIlvane had been buried for several days, but the whole place had an air of mourning about it.

After an hour or more Jesse James found the negro whom he had succeeded in bribing on former occasions, and told him he would give him five dollars if he would secure him an interview with Miss Madaline.

"Golly, boss, I do et if I kin; but I tole ye somefin', et won't be good for you, ef dey wuz ter find you about heah. Dey hang you foh suah."

"Is the funeral over?"

"Yes."

"Do they suspect me of doing it?"

"Some do an' some don't."

"Well, go on, now, and secure me an interview."

It was a very difficult task for the negro, but he succeeded.

In an hour Jesse James and Madaline met under an old oak tree, where he assured her that he had not slain her father and had not been any party to the atrocious act. He assured her that he would not have thought of such a thing, as he held her in too high respect to allow himself to injure her father.

In fact, by his subtle wiles, he soon won the sympathy and confidence of the silly girl.

He then assured her that he believed he knew who the real murderer was. It was no one else than Sam Hilderbrand, and that he could and would find the hiding place of Hilderbrand and turn him over to the officers of the law.

She was very grateful to him, and assured him that she could never do enough to repay him for his kindness.

He had now approached near enough to broach the subject nearest his heart. Had she learned anything of the silver mine?

No. Her father had died with that secret locked in his breast.

That was too bad. Jesse was very sorry, especially on her account, as he intended that she should have all the advantages of her father's great discovery. He went on to explain that he believed that there was a plan by which the secret might be discovered.

How?

By charms. He wanted the very pick her father had used, the selfsame pack and the selfsame mule with which he was wont to go and bring back the ore. The foolish girl did not see the plan of Jesse James, but attributed that power to some supernatural spell, to mesmerism or something by which they might find buried treasures. She assented to aid him.

"Very well, Madaline. Have the negro whom we have trusted all along with our secret load the mule with everything, just as your father loaded him, and have him tied to the big oak by the blasted pine on the bluff."

"I'll do it."

He then took leave of her, and went back to where his companions were, while she returned to the house.

Jesse James had scarcely been gone a moment before there rose from the grass and stunted cedars the tall, gaunt form of Sam Hilderbrand, holding in his hand his formidable rifle, a companion from which he was seldom separated.

"So, Jesse James, ye would betray me, would ye? You poor fool," he said. "I could bore a hole through your head, but I won't. No, I'll take a better advantage: a better revenge o' you than that. You love money, I don't care for it. You want the silver mine. I don't care if it is never found. I live only for revenge. You will never find the silver mine. Ha, ha, ha! I will destroy the only clew you have to it."

With this threat the frontiersman and desperado disappeared in the woods.

Jesse joined his companions, and told them of the express of his plans. They were now in high glee, for Jesse James had assured

that they would have the secret of the mine before another week had passed—a secret for which they had risked so much.

They were about to retire when suddenly Siroc gave vent to one of his peculiar snorts of uneasiness.

"Hello! what does that mean?" Jesse said.

"Why did he do that, Jesse?" Jim Cummins asked.

"He never does that for nothing. It means something."

"Whist! keep still."

Jesse James cocked his pistol and stepped behind a tree.

He heard a twig snap.

Jesse returned, and, in a whisper, said:

"Boys, mount."

"Is there danger near?"

"Yes. Carl Greene."

They all mounted their horses, and each man drew a revolver.

They started their horses along through the woods at a slow walk.

Jesse James did not know whether Carl Greene had come alone to capture them, or whether he was attended by a posse.

There was more danger of Carl Greene alone than when accompanied by a posse.

They rode about a mile at a slow walk, and came to a piece of second bottom land which was covered with grass. It was about the fourth of a mile across the bottom land, and the James Boys, putting their horses to a gallop, sped across it like the wind.

Once on the other side they came to a halt in some bushes and waited to see what would be the result.

A few moments later they saw a man ride down to the edge of the prairie.

"Now he will come across," said Jesse James. "Boys, cock your pistols and be ready to shoot him as soon as he gets in the middle of the prairie."

"Shall we all fire?" asked Jim.

"Yes, all fire. And as soon as you have fired the first shot we will charge and keep shooting at horse and rider until we have brought one or both down."

The horseman, whom they recognized as Carl Greene, came to the edge of the prairie, and, glancing across, halted.

The moon shone brightly, and it was almost as light as day. In fact, the man's features were easily distinguished by the men on the other side.

"There is no question about it," Frank James declared. "It is Carl Greene."

"Yes, and I'll bet my head he don't come across."

"If he knows we are here he will be a fool to do so."

The detective, after giving the prairie a careful looking over, suddenly wheeled about and darted into the bushes.

"He won't venture," said Jim.

"No, but you can depend that he will come round in some way and find us; you need have no doubt of that. He will flank us."

The James Boys again began the retreat.

They were in no particular hurry, but rode leisurely along, keeping a sharp lookout behind them.

Once they caught sight of the detective close in their rear, and a few pistol balls were sent whizzing through the air, but no harm was done.

"Carl Greene is alone!" said Jim.

"Yes, but he is more dangerous alone than with a posse. I don't fear his open attacks half so much as I fear his strategy," Jesse declared.

The James Boys continued their retreat, and Carl Greene continued shadowing them, without making any effort to capture them.

"I wonder what he means?" asked Jim.

"He merely intends to shadow us to our hiding place and then trust to some strategy to capture us."

"But can't we waylay and shoot him?" asked Frank James.

"It will be very difficult to do. He is on the watch and he will not come into any trap that we may set for him."

Then as they retreated Jesse, after a few moments' silence, said:

"Boys, we'll outwit him."

"How?"

"We can do it with our hut."

"I don't see how you can do that, Jesse," replied Frank.

"Just wait and follow instructions and you will see."

They made no effort to throw the detective off their trail, but continued on the retreat, and allowed him to follow if he chose.

Carl Greene was a little puzzled at the conduct of the fugitives.

"They have grown remarkably bold," he thought. "Very well, my fine fellows. I am not such a fool as to fight you at a disadvantage. We will continue to follow you for a while and find where your hiding place is, and then see what can be done."

Carl Greene took great care that he was not seen by them. He was concealed most of the time in the bushes or behind the trees, and they never got a sight of him after they exchanged the shots beyond the strip of prairie.

They did not look to see if Carl Greene was following, for they in fact knew he was.

They led him by a roundabout course.

The pursuit continued all the night and all the next day, until late in the evening, when they finally came to a dense thicket.

"I wonder where they are going now?" Carl Greene thought. He went slowly through the woods after them, and when he saw them disappear in the thicket, he said:

"I think they must be near their stronghold or rendezvous. Very well, my fine fellows, I'll follow you."

He pressed his way along through the dense thicket, making his way with the greatest difficulty.

He was forced to dismount and part the underbrush with his hands, and grope his way through the dark jungle which was almost as dark as midnight.

He kept pressing carefully on, always on the alert for some unexpected attack.

"This infernal jungle would be an excellent place to ambush a fellow," he thought.

To provide against an ambush he carried his revolver in his hand ready for use.

But he passed through the thicket and met with no adventure.

Once through it, he saw a thick wood for a few rods utterly devoid of undergrowth, and at the far end of it, built right against the face of the cliff, was a hut.

"Found it at last," Carl Greene said, with a chuckle. "It is a cunningly arranged plan, but I have got it at last. Now, all I have to do is to sit down and wait."

He selected a spot where three or four trees grew in a clump, so as to afford an excellent hiding place, and sat down to watch the house.

Carl Greene had found them, and now his plan was to wait and capture them one by one as they came out.

This would take time. But he had come prepared to stay a week if necessary. He turned his horse out to graze on the grass beyond the thicket, while he sat among the trees eating some crackers and dried beef as he watched the James Boys' hut.

Carl Greene was completely outwitted.

CHAPTER XV.

DEATH OF THE WHITE MULE—CONCLUSION.

When the sun set for a few minutes it was dark, but anon the moon rose, and, soaring aloft in the cloudless sky, flooded the whole scene with a light almost of day.

Jesse James, from the lookout post, had seen Carl Greene watching the hut. He had sent Frank and Jim, with the horses, through the cavern and out at another entrance, two miles below. When he was quite sure that Carl Greene only intended to shadow the house, he resolved to take his departure.

"Before thirty-six hours I will have the secret of the silver mine, and then Carl Greene can shadow the hut all summer," he declared, with a chuckle.

Jesse hurried to join his companions. He found them just outside the southern entrance with the horses.

"Is he there yet, Jesse?" Jim asked.

"Yes."

"We might have a look at him as we ride over the ridge."

"But we don't want him to have a look at us," Jesse remarked.

"No, we don't; we have outwitted him now, and we don't want to give the trick away."

But when they had reached the top of the bluff they dismounted, and, creeping close to the edge of it, gazed down upon the man sitting behind the trees below.

He was so far away that in the darkness it was impossible to tell who he was, but Jesse knew that it was Carl Greene still on the watch. With a low chuckle he said:

"Outwitted!"

They mounted, and by hard riding reached the home of Mr. McIlvane an hour before daylight.

"Now, Jesse, what is your next plan?" Jim asked.

"To get the white mule."

"When?"

"Before daylight."

"How are you going to do it?"

"I must see the nigger first," he said.

He went to a grove near the house and told the boys to wait there for him. Of course at this hour everything was buried in slumber.

Jesse dismounted, and turning his horse over to his companions, gave his arms a precautionary examination, and crept toward the negro quarters.

In the South, even at this day, a large plantation is completely surrounded by negro shanties. The planter has to furnish quarters for his hands, just as he had to furnish houses for his slaves before the war.

To one of these negro huts Jesse James wended his way, and reaching the door gave a gentle rap. There was a silence broken only by the snoring of lusty negroes within the hut.

"They sleep sound," he thought.

He rapped again, louder than before.

"Who dar?" asked a voice.

"Open the door, Jeff," he answered in a changed voice, so that he could not be recognized.

"Dis ain't Jeff's shanty!"

"Where is it?"

"Two houses on de right."

"All right, go ter sleep, I won't disturb yer," Jesse replied, in a voice that was completely disguised.

Now that he had the true direction there could be no mistake about his finding the right hut.

In less than two minutes he was rapping at Jeff's hut. But Jeff had been on a drunk the night before and was sleeping soundly. Jesse rapped heavily for some time, but failed to rouse him.

At last he resorted to regular thumps, and the negro was awakened.

"Good Lor' Almighty, who dar?" he asked.

"It is me, Jeff."

"Who de debbil am you?"

"A friend. Open the door and see."

Jeff got up grumbling at being disturbed, and Jesse said:

"Don't grumble, you shall be well paid for being disturbed."

Jeff, only half-dressed, opened the door and looked out at Jesse and said:

"Golly, it am Massa Jackson."

"Yes, it is, Jeff," Jesse James answered, in a whisper. "Come, dress hurriedly and come out here, there is twenty dollars in gold at stake."

Jesse James waited at one side of the cabin door for Jeff to dress himself and come out. He had not long to wait.

The promise of twenty dollars in gold had the effect of hastening his movements to a great degree.

He was at his side in a few moments, and Jesse said:

"Come this way, Jeff."

"Whar yer been, massa."

"Whist, Jeff! Don't speak until we are beyond hearing of any one."

"Ain't no danger o' wakin' any o' dem niggers up now. Dey had a dance last night, an' dey hain't but jest got ter sleep yer know."

When Jesse James got beyond any possible danger of being overheard he said:

"Jeff, we are suddenly compelled to run away. Did you bring the white mule?"

"Golly, I did, boss, an' a time I had a waitin' an' a waitin' dar for you all night."

"And you took him back?"

"Yes."

"What did your mistress say?"

"She say nuffin, only she don't know why yer don't come an' git de mule."

"You can explain that we were forced to fly away from here."

"I will."

"Jeff, has anything been heard of the silver mine?"

"No, boss."

"Jeff, are you telling me a truth?"

"I am, boss, as suah as I live."

"Now, Jeff, where is the white mule?"

"In de stable."

"You can find him?"

"Yes."

"Without being seen?"

"I kin, boss."

"And the pick, the pack saddle, the bag to carry the silver ore in, with the shovel, do you know where they are?"

"I know whar dem all is, boss."

"Well, Jeff, did you ever saddle the mule for McIlvane when he went on any of his secret expeditions after silver ore?"

"Yes, I allers do it, boss."

"Now, I want you to go and saddle that mule just as you saddled it then, and have the pick and shovel and everything that you had then and bring him to those trees yonder. If you do it successfully without awaking any one I will give you a twenty-dollar gold piece. If you fail, or attempt to betray us, I will give you a half-ounce bullet right between the eyes."

"Golly, massa, I won't fail! Dis nigger knows what he am about."

Jesse James returned to where his companions were and said:

"Boys, it is all right."

"Will the negro bring the mule?"

"Yes. If he don't come here in less than ten minutes he is a dead nigger; if he does bring it to us in that time he has twenty dollars in gold."

They sat down on the ground, allowing their horses to browse on the bushes and the grass that grew under the trees.

Before the time given had expired the mule appeared with the pack on his back, and the negro leading him.

"Heah he am, massa," said the negro.

"All right; now, Jeff, here is twenty dollars in gold," and Jesse handed him the money.

"Yes, boss. Golly! ain't I glad ter git dat. Now I'll be drunk fur a whole month."

"Jeff, are you sleepy?"

"Not much, boss."

"Yes, you are. Go back to your house and go to bed. Do you understand me? You must go to bed and to sleep. It is very unhealthy for a nigger out here in this damp atmosphere, and if you don't go to bed and lie there until the sun is well up in the sky you may get the bullet I promised you if you were not on time."

Jeff was considerably frightened and with chattering teeth said: "Golly, boss, I'll go and go ter sleep, suah."

"See that you do. Now, skip."

The negro wheeled about and made a bee line for his shanty.

Jesse turned to his companions and said:

"Boys, we have still three-quarters of an hour to spare, so let us be going. We want to be far from here before daylight."

"Yes."

They started and went about four miles on the road that Jesse had trailed the miner. That far he knew the road led to the silver mine. The mule went along before at a rapid walk, and Jesse said: "Boys, the plan will work."

"Yes, I know it will," Jim answered.

"See how he walks along. He will lead us directly to the mine."

The sun rose, and they had just reached the end of the first five miles, the limit to which Jesse James had tracked the old miner, and as far as he had tracked him.

"Now, we shall know if he will go on farther or stop," said Jesse James.

It was an exciting moment for the James Boys. All depended on what the mule did now. When he came to the end of the path he did not stop. There was another small path diverging off to the right, and, shaking his long ears, the mule put his nose down and sniffed the path and went on.

"See! see!" cried Jesse James. "he goes, he goes. We have it, boys, we have it. Millions of dollars will be ours in a short time."

The James Boys were never in higher glee. Wealth untold, pardon, freedom, honors of every kind seemed to loom up before them. The sun shone down brightly on the scene, and the mule was trotting leisurely along, leading directly to the hidden mine for which they had dared so much.

Suddenly there came a sharp report from the hillside, and with a groan the white mule fell stone dead in the path. A shot fired from behind the bushes on the hillside had done the work and forever destroyed all hope of their finding the silver mine.

Jesse James in his rage leaped his horse over some stones, and, with a cocked revolver, charged up the hill to avenge the mule, but though the smoke from the rifle shot still floated above the bushes not a sign of the marksman could be found.

Nor did the James Boys ever know who fired the fatal shot which destroyed all their hopes. Of course after the white mule was killed there was no chance for them to find the rich silver mine, and its whereabouts is still a secret, known only to the old forests of Missouri.

Carl Greene was outwitted. He watched the hut of the James Boys for several days before he learned that they had gone. In the meanwhile they had escaped to Clay County and were resting among friends. Jesse James never saw Madaline McIlvane again, and never ventured any more into St. Francois County, though he afterward met Hilderbrand, and the adventures of these wonderful outlaws may form the subject of another story in the near future.

THE END.

Read "THE JAMES BOYS' LOTTERY OF DEATH: OR, RUNNING THE GAUNTLET WITH DETECTIVES," which will be the next number (64) of "The James Boys Weekly."

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